

failed to rise to one of the occasions for which it was formed by its dithering over the damage caused in Florida by last week's hurricane, but instead added another chapter to the record of its reputation of unhelpfulness begun shortly after its creation in 1979.

FEMA, although conspicuous, is not alone among the government entities that appear to have been laggard in dealing with the residents of South Florida battered by Hurricane Andrew last week. The governor of Florida conceded that he had underestimated the severity of the hurricane, and White House spokesmen in Washington said that they began moving swiftly once they were told by state officials that relief work was too much for the Florida National Guard or Army Reservists. But that happened four days after the storm crunched its way across Florida and left some 200,000 people homeless in a welter of destruction and wreckage one witness called "worse than Kuwait City" after the Persian Gulf War.

It is not that nobody knew in advance about Hurricane Andrew and its viciousness, but it seemed as if not many people were telling others. The word did not float up to levels of officialdom where its significance could be appreciated, and, by the time it did, uncounted tens of thousands of people had gone without reliable water and electricity in 98-degree temperatures (Fahrenheit) for four days. By then, the people were mightily disgruntled. Mere promissory words from government offices would not suffice. What made the government's neglect grate more was that truckloads of food, ice, clothing, tools, and other necessities began pouring in from church groups, the American Red Cross, and other organizations as far away as Ohio.

FEMA held a press conference to assure reporters that it would fulfil its mission of producing a "coordinated" effort from among the 27 federal agencies whose help it can enlist in disaster relief programmes. The director of FEMA did not attend the press conference, but shortly afterwards the White House announced that the task of coordinating the relief work would be handled by the Secretary of Transportation; it was not immediately clear what the FEMA director would do. Longtime critics of FEMA doubted that the entire agency would do much, because historically it never has.

FEMA was formed during the Carter administration to serve as evaluator and disbursing officer of relief funds and to plan civil emergency preparedness for nuclear attack, among other things. The budget request for the impending fiscal year is at the billion-dollar level, but there is legislative work afoot to cut it by a couple of million. There is much conviction in Congress that FEMA has been ingloriously tardy and undersupplied in such disasters as Hurricane Hugo and the San Francisco earthquake, both in 1989, and such other events as the Los Angeles riots of 1992.

Those familiar with FEMA's shortcomings say they doubt that the sheer size of the Andrew devastation will be met by civil "coordination" efforts led by FEMA. It would take an army to meet the task, they say. Why not the US Army, which worked out the logistics of Desert Storm and the feeding of 500,000 troops in an exercise in central Florida? □

AIDS and virginity

The New York City Board of Education is in the dark ages, demanding that AIDS education emphasize abstinence.

It is difficult to imagine that, in what is supposed to be one of the most sophisticated cities in the world, serious people are still unwilling to recognize, first, that teenagers have sexual intercourse and, second, that the relentless spread of AIDS is aided and abetted by unprotected sexual contact. But that is exactly the case in New York City where, to the consternation of AIDS educators and the city Health Commissioner, the Board of Education has just voted for a policy requiring that anyone who enters the school system to teach about AIDS must sign a pledge promising to "stress that abstinence is the most appropriate premarital protection against AIDS". Further, the AIDS educators must pledge in writing that they will "devote substantially more time and attention to abstinence than to other methods of prevention".

For all practical purposes, this official break with reality and common sense means that AIDS education will have to be offered outside the school system, which some administrators opposed to AIDS education say is just fine with them. Displaying unrepentant homophobia, one is quoted as saying of the outside groups offering AIDS education that "most of these people going in there are the gay and lesbian community".

The fact that Health Commissioner Margaret A. Hamburg, backed by New York Mayor David N. Dinkins, is opposed to the moralistic pledge is apparently of little concern to the education board. Dr Hamburg is lending moral support to people who refuse to sign the pledge, rightly saying that AIDS education should be based on science and medicine. Unfortunately, she has no authority in the matter.

Meanwhile, AIDS education has also taken a knock in Washington, where the US National Commission on AIDS, whose members include basketball star Magic Johnson, has had to lay off half of its 20-member staff and cancel planned meetings because of budget restraints. The commission, counting on the use of \$750,000 from last year's budget, has just been told by the General Accounting Office that the money cannot be used in this fiscal year.

The national commission has been unrealistically harsh in its criticism of the Bush administration's response to the AIDS crisis, calling it "tragically insufficient". In fact, federal spending on AIDS research and drug testing is greater than for any other single disease. But the commission is entirely right in its criticism of the administration's benighted position on AIDS education. Though not as extreme as the New York City Board of Education, the administration, with its politically driven commitment to "family values", also refuses to accept that people practising "safe sex" (that is, the use of a condom) are less likely to get AIDS than those who have unprotected sex with several partners (the argument that condoms are not 100 per cent effective notwithstanding). The tragedy in this clash among so-called adults about what to teach on AIDS is that it is young people who will suffer. □