

## Samaritan evacuates 82 to S.D.

**By Cheryl Clark  
and Leonel Sanchez**  
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

September 5, 2005

A local businessman's concern for victims of Hurricane Katrina compelled him to charter a passenger jet and bring to San Diego 82 people who had lost everything in the disaster.

David Perez, 42, said he was so disturbed by images of ineffective disaster relief that he spent about \$250,000 to hire the Boeing 737 and fly the evacuees from Baton Rouge, La., to Lindbergh Field yesterday.

Perez, 42, pledged to continue that effort and urged others with means to join in.

"I'm providing people an opportunity to get out of hell, and I was willing to take them anywhere they wanted to go," said Perez, chief operating officer of Surge Global Energy in San Diego.

The evacuees were bused to Kearny High School and spent the night on cots in the school gymnasium. Red Cross officials intend to give them hotel rooms today.

"Our goal and role is to preserve their dignity and give them some time to be able to reassess, to get them some services that they require," Augie Ghio, San Diego Department of Homeland Security chief, said hours earlier at a news conference to announce plans to house and educate the evacuees, 16 of whom are children. "Then, they can move along with their lives and start the rebuilding process."

Red Cross and San Diego Unified School District officials said they were making preparations to accept as many as 600 more Gulf Coast residents if needed.

As the evacuees came down the ramp of the plane at Jimsair yesterday, many were in tears. One woman carried a newborn, and a boy joyously dribbled a ball as he ran across the tarmac.

The plane's cargo included three dogs, two cats and a bird.



JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune  
A Red Cross worker greeted the first evacuee off a plane from Baton Rouge, La., at Lindbergh Field yesterday as Deputy Mayor Toni Atkins and Councilman Tony Young (both in background) watched the other Hurricane Katrina evacuees arrive. The evacuees spent the night at Kearny High School.

Evacuee Shelley Harper cried as she was greeted by her sister, Sherri Triglia of Crest. Harper intended to stay in Crest until she figures out what to do. The sisters had lost communication after the hurricane and flooding. "Welcome to San Diego. We hope your troubles are behind you," said state Sen. Christine Kehoe, D-San Diego, one of several elected officials who greeted the evacuees on the tarmac.

"Some of the evacuees look like they'd been through a horror," Kehoe said later.

Perez's maverick effort had officials from San Diego relief agencies including the Red Cross, schools, medical, mental health, food, housing and federal homeland security officials scrambling to accommodate the evacuees.

Earlier in the day, Deputy Mayor Toni Atkins said at a news conference outside Kearny High that the nation "reached out to us" during the fires two years ago and "we want to reach our arms out to those who are in need today. Many of them have had days in the last few that you and I could never imagine."

Added Councilman Tony Young: "Many people in my district and throughout the city of San Diego have strong connections to these individuals in the South. Many of the residents of the 4th District are from Alabama, Mississippi, New Orleans."

Red Cross officials urged San Diegans who want to give to donate money rather than goods because storage space is limited and difficult to organize.

"We can buy what we need in bulk," spokeswoman Gayle Falkenthal said.

The families are certain to have significant needs, and many could make San Diego their home for months, with children attending school, officials said.

Cots and blankets lined the Kearny High gymnasium yesterday. Tables of medical supplies, "After the Flood" coloring books and crayons, Mickey Mouse dolls, hair products and clothing were in boxes.

As the evacuees arrived at the school, their privacy was closely guarded by Red Cross officials and police.

One evacuee said at Kearny High last night that she thanked and blessed Perez when he came to the Baton Rouge shelter she was in and offered to fly her and six of her family members to San Diego.

Sherry Reaux, 24, said she and her family were glad to be in San Diego but angry that they had to struggle to stay alive.



JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune

A distraught evacuee was comforted yesterday upon her arrival at Lindbergh Field by Ronne Froman, chief executive officer of the American Red Cross of San Diego and Imperial Counties, and Augie Ghio, director of San Diego's homeland security office.



JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune

Hurricane victims evacuated on a plane chartered by San Diego businessman David Perez arrived yesterday at Kearny High School, which is being used as a temporary shelter.

"This is a tragedy. We walked from New Orleans to Baton Rouge. Three shelters turned us away," Reaux said. "People had to go steal buses to get out."

Perez, who also owns a La Jolla lighting company and gives to local charities, has not been a household name. Philanthropist Michael Copley, a friend who helped with the logistics of yesterday's flight, described the Carmel Valley man as "the type of guy who goes full-out, who's very energetic and passionate."

After Perez chartered the jet, Copley said, Perez "had a helicopter pilot fly him to the hurricane site." After delays in finding federal officials to talk to about his plans, Perez finally was able to take the evacuees to San Diego, he said.

As the evacuees stepped off the plane and boarded three Horizon Christian Fellowship buses that would take them to the gymnasium, Perez sighed. Wearing jeans and sandals, he looked tired.

"I feel blessed to be in a position to help out" and urged San Diegans to do what they can. "There are still people there who need water and food," he said.

Late yesterday, Perez helped load the plane with food, water and medical supplies he and others had bought to be delivered to Louisiana.

*Staff writer Liz Neely contributed to this report.*

---

■ Cheryl Clark: (619) 542-4573; [cheryl.clark@uniontrib.com](mailto:cheryl.clark@uniontrib.com)

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/metro/20050905-9999-1n5evacuees.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.