

WASHINGTON, Aug. 30 (UPI) -- U.S. House Republican leaders say new funding to provide relief to victims of Hurricane Irene or other disasters must be offset by cuts elsewhere.

Unless additional disaster aid is appropriated, federal officials said communities still rebuilding from natural disasters earlier this year must wait while funds are diverted to help victims of Hurricane Irene, the Los Angeles Times reported Monday.

Although members of Congress don't return to Washington until next week, opening funding salvos were fired Monday when House Republican leaders called for offsetting cuts to any new spending for disaster relief and reconstruction.

Democrats said the GOP's call was an unfair and unprecedented approach to emergency management.

"We will find the money if there is a need for additional money but those monies are not unlimited," House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., told Fox News. "We'll find other places to save so that we can fund the role the federal government needs to play."

The problem is that the Federal Emergency Management Agency is running out of money, the Times said. FEMA has less than \$800 million left in a special disaster fund and already was spending \$400 million a month before Hurricane Irene struck.

Agency Administrator Craig Fugate said FEMA was discussing a supplemental funding request with the White House.

Administration spokesman Jay Carney said FEMA was assessing damages and costs associated with Irene, "so it's premature to make a determination yet about what kind of costs could be incurred at the federal level."

Carney said President Obama was "very committed" to fiscal discipline and applauded others who also were committed.

"I guess I can't help but say that I wish that commitment to looking for offsets had been held by the House majority leader and others, say, during the previous administration when they ran up unprecedented bills and ... never paid for them."

Rep. David Price of North Carolina, the top Democrat on the Homeland Security appropriations subcommittee, said now wasn't the time for "another round of budget politics."

"Livelihoods and local economies depend on swift relief and assistance in the event of a natural disaster," **Price** said, "and the millions of Americans affected by Irene and other recent events can't afford to wait around while Republicans pick another budget fight with [President Obama] by holding disaster relief hostage to further spending cuts."

Fugate said the agency wouldn't consider new applications for what it characterizes as permanent repair work from disasters before Irene.

"Any projects that have not come in for approval, we're not going to be able to fund those as this point. We're going to postpone those," Fugate said Monday.