

Shock, disbelief and anger

Europe reacts to US hurricane disaster

Stefan Steinberg
3 September 2005

Extensive TV reports and news photos over the last three days have brought home to the European public the appalling extent of the flood catastrophe in the southern states of the US.

The scenes of destruction, desperation and poverty, as well as overwhelming evidence of official negligence, inevitably recalled the scenes of the tsunami disaster that devastated large parts of southern Asia last December, as well as a number of floods that have recently hit impoverished countries such as Bangladesh and India.

The television footage and commentary have shown ramshackle housing swept away by the hurricane surge and the plight of dishevelled, starving and bewildered Americans demanding that they receive some sort of assistance. Alongside images of devastation and misery usually associated with third-world countries, European media reports have drawn attention to the complete lack of organised aid for the victims.

Instead of temporary food and shelter, along with medical care, viewers have seen the martial intervention of American state forces and the National Guard, whose first concern is the preservation of property and the suppression of unrest. Britain's state-run BBC included an on-the-spot report Friday by a journalist who compared downtown New Orleans, patrolled by US armoured vehicles and National Guard troops, to war-torn Baghdad.

Interviews with starving survivors outside the New Orleans Superdome revealed that after arriving, they were forced to wait outside the locked gates. The only aid they received was military rations and water bottles dropped by helicopters, after which the copters rapidly quit the scene. The anger of victims confronted with the complacency and hostility of local and federal authorities was writ large on their faces and made clear in their comments to reporters.

Press reactions in Europe to the disaster have ranged from complacent commentaries declaring that the disaster was unique and nothing could have been done to mitigate

it (the Murdoch group; e.g., the *Times* of London) to highly critical columns in other newspapers. A number of European newspapers drew a direct connection between the tragedy and the overall state of American society.

Germany's *Die Welt* was one of a number of papers that compared the events in Louisiana with social relations in third-world countries. It wrote, "America looks alarmingly like a third-world country within its own borders, divided and violent...20,000 people are vegetating in what looks like a camp for war refugees."

The Austrian *Der Standard* led with the headline, "Third-World USA," and stated that hurricane Katrina had revealed the enormous gulf between the appearance of technological superiority and the third-world conditions that exist in the US heartland. It went on to comment on the "ideological climate of the Bush government, which looks upon the poor black population with a mixture of distress and disinterest."

Belgium's *Le Soir* condemned the "richest country on the planet for deserting the deprived, the poor, the sick and the aged in the face of a cataclysm that had been predicted and could have been prevented."

The Netherlands is a small country with its own experience in the construction of dams to ward off coastal waters, and the Belgian *Het Laaste Nieuws* argued against those who claimed that nothing could be done about the catastrophe:

"The American government seems to be light years away from being prepared for a catastrophe of such proportions. The pictures show just chaos. People plundering, police threatening to shoot them, not the slightest trace of any organised assistance, a city of millions that is sinking further and further under water because no one is capable of filling the holes in the dams. The Netherlands, a country that largely lies below sea level, has not experienced a drop of water for the past 50 years. The flood in New Orleans is the reverse side of an American society which is aimed at earning as much

money as possible in the quickest time with a slimmed-down administration that costs as little as possible.”

The Spanish daily paper *La Vanguardia* drew attention to the lack of any sort of organised assistance for the victims of the hurricane and the “hands-off” approach of the American authorities: “Not even the richest world power was able to prevent the costly trail of death and destruction of the hurricane.... But as well as the many dead, the enormous damage, and the costs of rebuilding, the tragedy also raises a moral question: To what extent can a government force its own citizens to save their own lives?”

Remarking on the underlying social conditions exposed by the hurricane tragedy, other newspapers have predicted that the current crisis will have inevitable political repercussions and threaten the president himself. In a comment in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* entitled “Bush in a Storm,” Stefan Cornelius began by drawing parallels between US president Bush’s initial paralysis on hearing of the September 11 terror attacks and his reluctance to leave his holiday ranch to address the hurricane crisis.

He then remarked: “The natural catastrophe in the US is also turning into a threat to the president. Alongside the dams of New Orleans, the carefully maintained barriers between social layers have also been breached. Because the south of the country was always the land of the poor and neglected, hopelessness and desperation have erupted into violence and anarchy. The scenes around the Superdome, the shots fired on helpers, the plundering and the call for a sort of martial law—all this serves to shock and reveal the sort of divisions with which the highly developed US has to contend.... The more the anarchy in the south spreads, the more likely political Washington will seek a victim for this demonstration of state weakness.”

This theme was also taken up by the British *Independent* newspaper, which entitled its September 2 editorial “A Disaster that Will Test Mr. Bush and All US Society” and speculated that the Republican Party as a whole could suffer from public anger over the social disintegration currently taking place in America’s south.

The editorial declared: “The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina also poses searching questions about the nature of US society and about the priorities the current administration has set. What happens to the many uninsured in a country where people rely on private insurance for medical treatment? And what happens to the bereaved families of breadwinners who have no life insurance, or to those with homes or businesses that were

not insured.... Mr. Bush, for whom this 9/11 of a natural disaster has come just in time to distract attention from the growing mayhem in Iraq, does not have to face the electorate. The Republican party, to the extent that it espouses Bush, risks reaping the political whirlwind in his place.”

With many newspapers reflecting widespread shock and anger at the events in the US, official political circles in Europe have moved quickly to exploit widespread sympathy with the victims of the hurricane by expressing their solidarity with the Bush government. In Germany, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party) broke off federal election engagements to officially coordinate German proposals for assistance.

In recent months, Schröder has had a series of differences with Washington—most recently over German demands for a full seat on the UN Security Council—but in his comments on the hurricane catastrophe, he has refrained from any sort of criticism of the actions (or lack of action) by the US government. Instead, he announced that Germany would help in any way possible. For his part, Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) contacted his US counterpart Condoleezza Rice to offer his condolences and once again make clear Germany’s readiness to help. In Great Britain, the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair has been so far reluctant to comment directly on the disaster.

There is palpable unease in political circles in Europe that the political and economic repercussions of the crisis in the US south could not only have an impact on the Bush government, but could endanger the stability of capitalism as a whole. For many years now, social democratic politicians such as Schröder and Blair have been preaching the advantages arising from the introduction of American-style social conditions in Europe. In the space of days, Hurricane Katrina has exposed the venal and predatory nature of US capitalist society, and what political leaders have in store for working people in Europe.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact