

Forty-five bodies recovered at New Orleans hospital

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The discovery of 45 bodies at a flooded hospital in uptown New Orleans on Sunday is the latest grisly testament to the needless loss of life from Hurricane Katrina. Like many of the victims, the majority of these 45 people were not killed by the impact of the storm itself, but by the failure of authorities to evacuate stranded, dehydrated and starving people for days on end after Katrina struck.

The grim recovery was announced on Monday just after President Bush completed a swift, 45-minute tour of the ravaged city. He responded testily to a reporter who asked whether he was dissatisfied with the response of federal officials to the disaster. “Look,” he said, “there will be plenty of time to play the blame game. That’s what you’re trying to do.” He added glibly, “My impression of New Orleans is this: that there is a recovery on the way.”

With these hospital deaths and other body recoveries, the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals on Tuesday afternoon raised the official death toll in the state to 423, up sharply from 279 the day before. This brought the overall confirmed deaths from Katrina to 648, including 218 in Mississippi and 7 in Florida. The bodies found at the hospital were the largest cluster so far recovered, and many more undoubtedly will be recovered in the days to come.

Officials at the Memorial Medical Center said that the dead were left there after a frantic evacuation from the hospital, with many not leaving until Friday afternoon, more than four days after Katrina hit. Steven Campanini, a spokesman for the hospital’s owner, Tenet Healthcare Corp., said the hospital was told Wednesday “that we were on our own to evacuate, [and] we brought our own helicopters to take the patients out.” Floodwaters had cut off roads. Some people reportedly eventually escaped by boat.

While Tenet Healthcare asserted in a statement that “a significant number had passed before the hurricane,” Campanini told the *New York Times* the dead included patients who died awaiting evacuation, as conditions grew increasingly desperate at the facility. Many of the patients were in long-term acute care for serious illnesses. As patients, families and hospital staff waited to be evacuated, temperatures rose to over 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius).

Medical professionals inside Memorial Medical Center described the conditions to the *Washington Post*. “Things looked like they were going downhill quickly,” said Scot Sonnier, an oncologist. Electricity was lost and the hallways were dimly lit with emergency power. Water grew scarce and medical supplies were dwindling. Heat, dehydration and lack of medicine—not flood waters or hurricane winds—led to the deaths of the vast majority those who languished waiting to be evacuated.

Local and federal officials have faced sharp criticism that patients were left defenseless against the hurricane at many medical facilities. According to the Louisiana Nursing Home Association, patients at 70 percent of the 53 nursing homes in the New Orleans area were not evacuated before Katrina struck on Monday morning, August 29. In many cases, private nursing home owners had no practical plans in place to evacuate their elderly patients.

Last week, searchers recovered the decomposing bodies of 34 patients at St. Rita’s Nursing Home in St. Bernard Parish, just outside New Orleans, who died when the facility flooded. On Tuesday, Louisiana Attorney General Charles Foti charged the nursing home’s two owners with 34 counts of negligent homicide. “They didn’t follow the standard of care of what a reasonable person would follow,” Foti said.

Although the owners are clearly culpable, the authorities are guilty of failing to enforce state regulations requiring evacuation plans.

While the patients at Memorial Medical Center and St. Rita's Nursing home died as a result of the failure to evacuate them, others who did manage to escape the flood waters also perished. The most glaringly needless of these deaths occurred at the Superdome and New Orleans Convention Center, where tens of thousands of evacuees were housed under unspeakable conditions. Officials put the death toll at the two facilities at a combined total of 34.

At the Superdome, two-thirds of the 24,000 people herded inside were women, children and the elderly, and many were sick. Electricity was knocked out, and temperatures rose to over 100 degrees. The stench of human waste pervaded the facility. People began to line up on Wednesday for buses promised to arrive on Thursday, but they didn't materialize.

By Friday, the meager military rations and water afforded the evacuees had run out. According to a *New York Times* report, by the time the last buses finally arrived on Saturday, "Some children were so dehydrated that guardsmen had to carry them out, and several adults died while walking to the buses."

Similar squalid conditions existed for the 15,000 evacuees housed at the mile-long Convention Center. While authorities had initially anticipated that people would only have to be housed there and at the Superdome for 48 hours, those two days were stretched to five, as food and water ran out and stifling heat became intolerable.

The "City of New Orleans Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan" in place before Hurricane Katrina noted that 100,000 New Orleans residents "do not have the means of personal transportation" to evacuate if warranted by emergency conditions. But neither local authorities nor the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had any practical plans in place to provide these people with transportation or shelter.

At a press conference Tuesday afternoon, after two weeks of dodging any blame on the part of his administration for the Katrina tragedy, Bush offered a disingenuous admission. "Katrina exposed serious problems in our response capability at all levels of government," he said. "And to the extent that the

federal government didn't fully do its job right, I take responsibility."

Bush was no doubt responding to polls showing his job approval rating at an all-time low—40 percent—and his disapproval rating climbing to an all-time high of 52 percent, with support dropping not only among Democrats and independents, but also among Republicans.

According to two polls released on Monday—one by ABC News/*Washington Post* and the other by CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup—54 percent of Americans disapprove of Bush's handling of the response to Katrina. Another poll by *Time* magazine found six in ten Americans believe the US should reduce spending in Iraq to help pay for the hurricane relief effort, while a similar number are in favor of a partial withdrawal of US troops from Iraq to help pay for the storm response.



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