

Astrodome refugees report hellish conditions in New Orleans

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The city of Houston, Texas, opened the Astrodome a week ago to victims of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. By Thursday evening, the Astrodome was filled to capacity with more than 11,000 refugees, most of whom had been transferred from New Orleans's Superdome, which many described as a concentration camp where they experienced inhumane and intolerable conditions.

The Reliant Center, adjacent to the Astrodome, was opened on Friday to an additional 11,000 refugees. Both the Astrodome and the Reliant Center are part of the Reliant Park compound of sports arenas and stadiums, which also includes Reliant Stadium and Reliant Arena.

Neither Reliant Stadium, where the Houston Texans of the National Football League play, nor Minute Maid Park, a large stadium in the city's downtown and home of the Houston Astros baseball team, will be open to refugees. Both have retractable roofs and could house tens of thousands more refugees, but the city refuses to consider forcing for-profit sports franchises to find other accommodations so that it could be more responsive to the plight of the hurricane victims and house more of them. Reliant Arena, meanwhile, is being used as a processing and medical evaluation facility for the refugees before they move into the Astrodome or the Reliant Center.

Houston police and Harrison County sheriff's deputies control traffic around Reliant Park. All weekend long, a steady stream of cars poured into a vast parking lot reserved for volunteers. Other large parking lots were filling with the cars of people arriving in search of family and friends. All Astrodome and Reliant Center "guests," meanwhile, wear pink wrist bands identifying them as refugees, which allows them access to the sprawling compound.

Outside Reliant Park last Sunday, hundreds of individuals and families who survived the hurricane and its aftermath sat in the shade under trees or walked about exploring their new surroundings. Many refugees walked to the Astrodome Shopping Center across Kirby Drive from the Reliant Park complex to purchase shirts, shoes, and other items with what little cash they had. Volunteers, meanwhile, pulled up in a van and passed out T-shirts and other items of clothing.

Gary Johnson, 41, was in a line that formed outside the shopping center's Payless shoe store with friend Earl Acklin, 35, and Earl's daughter, Kendriana Clark, age 7. The store, clearly overwhelmed with new customers, had a sign on the door that limited patronage to just 10 customers at a time.

Gary and Earl both lived in a two-story apartment building in New Orleans's 7th Ward. The hurricane hit early Monday morning, August 29, and by Monday night water had risen to the second floor, forcing residents to the roof. Food and water supplies quickly dwindled.

Gary and Earl were forced to obtain food for residents for the next three days by swimming back and forth between the apartment building and sources of food and water. The apartment manager eventually ferried residents to a freeway overpass where they slept on Thursday night. The National Guard picked them up on Friday and took them to a bus station, where they eventually boarded a bus to Houston.

Other residents, however, didn't make it. "It was eerie," said Gary. "We have elderly neighbors who live in homes next to our apartment. I know that they didn't leave, and the water rose so fast that we couldn't get to them. The water rose so high that only their roofs showed through."

Shaking his head, Gary said, "It was so quiet. You knew there were people inside those houses, but there wasn't anyone on the roofs and no one was coming out."

Speaking of what he saw in the city during his ordeal, Gary said, "It looks like Iraq, man. New Orleans looks like Iraq. Everything is torn up. There are people shooting, debris everywhere, bodies."

Inside the Astrodome, meanwhile, "it is pandemonium," according to Gary.

Looking distressed, Lolita Kennedy, 49, stepped up because she wanted her story to be heard. Lolita lived on O'Reilly Street, near the city's Fair Grounds Racetrack. She evacuated her home before the hurricane hit and stayed with her elderly mother, who lives in a part of the city that is on higher ground and was not flooded. With no power and no phones, Lolita and her mother stuck it out until the toilet began to back up. "I told my mother we have to go now, we can't stay."

They packed lightly, thinking they could return within a couple of days, and drove off, heading west out of the city. Tired and looking for a room for the night, they found that motels were price-gouging, charging far more than their usual rates. Area motel chains, like the oil companies, raised prices to take advantage of the catastrophe and profit from human misery. They ended up driving until reaching Houston and checked in through the Reliant Arena processing facility. Her mother was evaluated by medical personnel and admitted into a nearby hospital.

Kolita said that her entire neighborhood is under nearly 20 feet

of water. “I’ve lost everything,” she said. “And now my mother’s in the hospital, and I’ve got to find a place to stay. But I have no money, and these places around here want two months’ rent up front.” Her aunt, Cynthia Evans, 62, an employee at Linda Boggs Hospital in New Orleans, and her elderly grandmother, who will be 93 in October and was a patient at Linda Boggs, are unaccounted for. “I have no idea what happened to them or where they’ve been taken,” she said.

Kolita grew increasingly upset as she spoke. “Why did they bring buses in after the fact? Why couldn’t they bring in buses before? The whole system is all messed up. It wasn’t like we could leave,” she said. “You got to have money to leave.”

Outside a nearby Holiday Inn, Phyllis Allen and several members of her extended family gathered in the shade. Eight of them had spent the night there, paying a higher rate than other guests. “We had to get out of the Astrodome,” said Phyllis. “It’s crazy in there.”

Phyllis’s 20-year-old niece, Keon Thomas, was with them. She had just moved from Atlanta to New Orleans a few days before the hurricane hit, and now all of her belongings are inside her new apartment—underwater.

Phyllis worked at a Kinko’s in New Orleans. She and several members of her family, including Keon, stayed with Phyllis’s boss to weather the storm. On Monday night, after the storm had passed, the water began to rise very quickly. “It poured into the streets like a river,” said Keon.

By Tuesday morning, the whole family was forced to move upstairs as the water filled the first floor. But the water continued to rise, and the family was petrified. Among them was Phyllis’s elderly mother-in-law and several small children. It was very hot, there were no bathrooms, and no food or water. Several of them climbed up onto the roof and spray-painted on a large bed sheet, “10 People in Our House—Please Help.”

“Helicopters kept flying over,” said Keon. “But they wouldn’t stop. They would just fly right on past us, and you knew they could see us.”

On Tuesday night, rescuers arrived by boat. The trapped family members were told not to bring any food or water because they would be provided. The rescuers dropped them off on a freeway overpass in order to rescue more residents. There was no food or water on the bridge, and the family spent the night there. The condition of Phyllis’s elderly mother-in-law rapidly deteriorated. She began to drift in and out of consciousness and could no longer speak. “It was so hot,” said Phyllis, “and there was no water. And there were a lot of mosquitoes.”

The bridge filled with rescued residents, and at least two people died overnight. When the National Guard arrived on Wednesday, they were taken to the Superdome, where again there was no provision of food or water. “It was horrible,” said Keon. “There were so many people, and people were angry, fighting. There were women holding dead babies. It was so hot, and it stunk bad.

“Old people were dying, little kids were dying. And the police and National Guard, they treated us like animals. They would scream at us. I was constantly in tears. My grandma is dying, I said, we need water, these kids need water. A cop said ‘Bitch, get back’—his name was Williams,” she said.

“They were raping people in the bathrooms,” said Keon. “They were raping kids, and police were pushing people around. They shot one guy in the head, right there in the dome. He just lay there, dead.”

Phyllis and Keon described a scene in which men and women of all ages were passing out from the heat. Many died because there were no medical personnel or provisions. Their bodies literally littered the ground all about the Superdome, both inside and out.

When buses finally arrived, they were forced to wait another 12 hours before boarding. Guards prevented people from boarding the buses, insisting that they form single lines. “Imagine 20,000 people and getting them into single lines,” Keon said.

Once on the bus, Keon said the trip was long, but at least there was air conditioning. They arrived at Reliant Park on Friday, and Phyllis’s ailing mother-in-law was sent immediately by ambulance to Ben Taub General Hospital in Houston. They do not know her condition.

“The system treated us like shit,” said Keon. “They failed us.”

In 2004, Category 5 Hurricane Ivan swept over the impoverished island of Cuba. Some 1.5 million residents had been evacuated before the storm hit with its 160-mile-per-hour winds, and there was no loss of life. The United Nations International Secretariat for Disaster Reduction cited Cuba as a model for hurricane preparation.

In the US, the wealthiest nation on earth, the story is much different. This is despite the fact that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), subsumed by the Bush administration into the Department of Homeland Security after 9/11, issued a report warning that a hurricane hitting New Orleans would be the most likely and potentially catastrophic of the three biggest threats facing the US “homeland.” As the British *Guardian* newspaper reported on Sunday, “The catastrophe on the Gulf coast may be the most widely predicted catastrophe in American history.”

What is clear is that the loss of life from Hurricane Katrina was avoidable and this human catastrophe did not have to happen.



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