

New storm threat forces resumed evacuation from New Orleans

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Officials in New Orleans ordered a halt to the return of city residents driven from their homes by Hurricane Katrina, as another hurricane battered the Florida Keys on its way into the Gulf of Mexico, with a potential landfall in Texas or Louisiana by the end of the week.

Mayor Ray Nagin issued a mandatory order only two days after the first residents began returning to selected city neighborhoods on higher ground, including the French Quarter, Uptown and Algiers. He cited the danger of Hurricane Rita, which strengthened from a tropical storm over the weekend and was expected to hit the Florida Keys and parts of Cuba on Monday night or early Tuesday morning.

The bulk of the population of the Keys, the island chain that extends from south Florida, was evacuating in the face of the storm, and emergency preparations were under way in adjacent counties on the mainland. In Cuba, the government issued a hurricane warning for the western provinces of the island, including the city of Havana and its environs.

While Rita is at present much weaker than Katrina—its maximum wind speeds were barely above the 75 mph threshold for a Category 1 hurricane—it is expected to strengthen considerably once it passes the strait of Florida and enters the warmer waters of the Gulf of Mexico Wednesday. Katrina also hit Florida as a low-intensity Category 1 storm, before increasing enormously in size and power as it passed through the Gulf of Mexico towards Louisiana and Mississippi.

The high pressure system now over Louisiana would deflect the hurricane further west, towards the south Texas coast, but officials of the National Weather Service warned that the atmospheric conditions could change considerably before Rita approaches land again, perhaps as early as Friday.

Given the weakened condition of the levees and pumping stations in New Orleans—and the complete

absence of levees east of the city in St. Bernard Parish—even a heavy rain, let alone hurricane-force winds and a storm surge, would be enough to produce a new round of massive flooding.

Mayor Nagin claimed that at least one weather projection had Rita intensifying to a Category 3 storm and hitting the Louisiana coast. He ordered the evacuation of all residents on the east bank of the Mississippi, while recommending voluntary evacuation of the west bank, which had comparatively little flooding after Katrina.

Nagin had urged residents to return to some of the higher-ground neighborhoods over the weekend. Hundreds of business owners were the first ones back in the city Saturday, given early admittance to check on the conditions of their businesses. Residents of the higher-elevation—and higher-income—areas began returning Monday morning, only to be compelled to turn around within hours. No one has been allowed to return to the largely working class eastern half of the city, where the flooding was the worst and most homes and workplaces are a total loss.

Emergency preparedness officials, both state and federal, voiced open disagreement with Nagin's repopulation appeal and lobbied the mayor to rescind it. The Bush administration also put pressure on the city government. In a comment that suggested more than simply concern about this week's weather, President Bush said: "The mayor—you know, he's got this dream about having a city up and running, and we share that dream. But we also want to be realistic about some of the hurdles and obstacles that we all confront in repopulating New Orleans."

Bush has been under heavy criticism from his own political allies in the right wing of the Republican Party, and from right-wing media organs like the *Wall Street Journal*. They have denounced his pledge to rebuild New Orleans, delivered in a nationally televised speech

September 15, on the grounds that it is too costly and represents a break with the administration's policy of slashing federal social programs.

In response to these concerns, the White House spent the weekend underscoring its intention to use the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast as a pretext for radical right-wing social engineering, including promoting school privatization and wage-cutting.

On Friday, the administration proposed \$500 million in federal funding to allow private school students displaced from New Orleans to enroll in private schools elsewhere. If approved by the Republican-controlled Congress, it would be the largest school voucher program ever undertaken by the federal government. The federal government would reimburse up to \$7,500 in private school tuition, an enormous sum that will go largely to upper-middle-class and upper-class families, while working class youth are crammed into already underfunded public schools in Houston, Dallas, Baton Rouge and other cities that have received large numbers of Katrina evacuees.

Elaborating on Bush's proposal for "Worker Recovery Accounts," providing up to \$5,000 for job retraining, Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao emphasized that this was not a government jobs program. "Individuals want to be empowered to take ownership of their own careers," she said, citing the continuity with previous Bush administration efforts to establish "personal reemployment accounts" that could be used for job training, child care, transportation or other work-related expenses. These accounts were blocked by congressional opponents concerned that the accounts, to be administered by state unemployment agencies, would become the pretext for phasing out traditional unemployment compensation.

The White House released additional details on the proposed Gulf Opportunity Zone, indicating both its politically reactionary character—it would suspend most taxes and regulations on businesses, giving them a completely free hand to exploit and abuse workers—and its extremely limited scale. The entire cost of the program would be only \$2 billion, a drop in the bucket compared to the estimated \$200 billion in damages inflicted by Katrina.

Equally tiny is the "urban homesteading" plan, which would make available federal land in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast for families who wished to rebuild. The White House revealed that the Department of Housing and Urban Development has only 1,000 homes or

apartments on which it has foreclosed in the whole New Orleans area. This compares to 160,000 homes ruined or destroyed in Orleans Parish alone.

Neither the Democratic Party nor the media have highlighted the ridiculous insufficiency of these proposals, which, even if accepted as good coin, would not come close to meeting the enormous social needs in the wake of Katrina. There are an estimated 1.1 million vacant housing units in the Southern US states—more than enough to rehouse all the displaced families immediately in decent accommodation.

But instead of suggesting such an obvious and practicable method as allocating existing resources to meet human needs—which would trespass on the holy of holies, private property—the Federal Emergency Management Agency is seeking to cram the evacuees into hundreds of thousands of trailers, RVs and mobile homes, in huge conglomerations that would require new schools, health-care facilities, roads and utilities.

There were new reports of disarray in the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the lead agency in the disaster relief, whose former chief, Michael D. Brown, was forced to resign a week ago. William Lokey, FEMA's coordinating officer for the tri-state region hit by Hurricane Katrina, told the *New York Times*, "It is not going as fast as I would like, and yes, I do not have the resources I would like."

Lokey admitted that disaster preparation had suffered because of the Bush administration's placing priority on terrorism. "If the billions of dollars that have been spent on chemical, nuclear and biological response, if some of that had come over here, we would have done better," he told the *Times*.

He indicated that it would difficult to meet an October 15 deadline for rehousing all those evacuees now living in shelters, stadiums, arenas and other emergency facilities.

There are also reports that states like Texas are denying access to welfare programs for Louisiana families who were eligible for such assistance at home. This includes Head Start and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.



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