

Hurricane's victims left to die on New Orleans streets

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New Orleans descended into abject social misery and chaos Thursday as survivors of Hurricane Katrina, left abandoned to their fate for four days, literally began dying in the city's sewage- and trash-filled streets.

Tens of thousands of people, many with little more than the clothes on their backs, packed sidewalks and streets surrounding the New Orleans Superdome and the city's convention center, designated as a secondary refuge, to await an evacuation that is coming too late and far too slowly.

There were reports Thursday morning that evacuations had been suspended at least temporarily over security concerns. Shots were reported fired in the vicinity of the Superdome and at least one helicopter was said to have come under gunfire. Trash fires burned in the vicinity, while in another area of the city a housing project off Interstate 10 burned out of control.

Many of those waiting to be evacuated have no water and have not eaten for days. Crowds chanted as television cameras filmed the scene, "We want, we want help," while others begged, "Don't leave us here to die." Many cursed local, state and federal officials for what has emerged as criminal neglect and incompetence from the White House on down.

Expressing the mounting frustration within the city, Terry Ebbert, the head of the city's emergency operations, called the US government's response to the disaster "a national disgrace." He noted that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) "has been here three days, yet there is no command and control." The delay, he warned, had created an "incredibly explosive situation."

CNN reporter Chris Lawrence reported seeing "many, many bodies" both inside and outside the convention center, where the elderly and the sick have dropped dead in the intense heat. The network broadcast images of an elderly woman dead in her wheelchair and another body wrapped in a blanket, both abandoned by the side of the building.

According to the city's mayor, Ray Nagin, as many as 20,000 people have gathered outside the center. They include entire families as well as many mothers with infants, children and the elderly. Nagin's office issued a statement Thursday describing the site as "unsanitary and unsafe," adding, "we are running out of supplies for people."

Estimates of the crowd that massed outside the Superdome

Thursday ranged as high as 40,000, approximately twice the number that the authorities had organized to transport to yet another stadium, the Astrodome, a six-hour bus ride away in Houston, Texas.

The desperation of those seeking to get out of the city was evident. According to one report, after failing to get on a Houston-bound bus, a woman handed her two-month-old child over to a stranger on the vehicle, asking her to save her baby.

Conditions inside the New Orleans stadium were widely described as hell on earth in the days following the storm's striking the city. The hurricane and subsequent flooding left the facility dark and sweltering without lights or air-conditioning. The odor from piles of rotting trash and overflowing toilets was overpowering. Food, water and other basic necessities were in short supply.

There were reports of deaths inside the crowded stadium, including the suicide of one man who hurled himself from a balcony after learning that his home had been destroyed.

Those who went into the stadium were not allowed to leave. Many complained that they were being "treated like animals" and that the facility was "worse than a prison." Little or no information was provided to these storm refugees.

Gordon Russell of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* noted pointedly that these hellish conditions "stood in stark contrast to those of people nearby in the restricted-access New Orleans Centre and Hyatt Hotel, where those who could get in lounged in relative comfort." A line of state police armed with assault rifles drove the crowds of homeless refugees back from the entrance to the facility.

Russell continued, "A few blocks farther away, guests were being fed 'foie gras and rack of lamb' for dinner, according to a photographer who stayed there, while the masses, most of them poor, huddled in the Dome."

The badly improvised character of the original decision to house people in the Superdome during the storm appears likely to be compounded by the mass migration to the stadium in Houston.

While officials have spoken in vague terms about obtaining more suitable housing, officials in Texas indicated that the Astrodome's schedule is being cleared into December, indicating plans to use it as a long-term shelter.

Judge Robert Eckels, chief executive of Harris County, which owns the Astrodome, insisted that facility would not be “a jail.” This claim was belied, however, by reports that the New Orleans refugees would need passes to leave the facility, as well by the large number of police deployed around the stadium.

The first refugees from New Orleans to arrive at the stadium were a group composed largely of youth and children aboard a commandeered school bus. Initially, Houston officials were going to turn them away, insisting that they had agreed only to admit 23,000 people from the Superdome. They were overruled, however, by Red Cross workers, who brought the group in.

Others, however, were not so lucky. “We have nowhere to go, nowhere to sleep,” Rhonda Calderon told the *Washington Post* after crowding with six others into a Nissan to flee New Orleans and reach the Houston stadium, only to be turned away. “We came to Houston seeking shelter, our kids are hungry. We have no gas. What do we do?”

Among the most desperate conditions in New Orleans were those at two city hospitals that still awaited evacuation on the fourth day since the hurricane struck. The Associated Press reported that doctors from the two public facilities had called pleading for aid. They reported that they have no electrical power and have run out of food and have only a small amount of water. Charity Hospital has about 250 patients, while University Hospital has about 110.

“Most of our power is out. Much of the hospital is in the dark,” Dr. Norman McSwain, chief of trauma surgery at Charity told the AP. “The ICU [intensive care unit] is on the 12th floor, so the physicians and nurses are having to walk up floors to see the patients.”

Dr. Lee Hamm, chairman of Medicine at Tulane University said, “We’re afraid that somehow these two hospitals have been left off...that somehow somebody has either forgotten it or ignored it or something, because there is no evidence anything is being done.” Tulane, a private facility, had by Thursday nearly completed the evacuation of its 1,000 patients.

At another public facility, Touro Infirmary, staff evacuated 65 patients to the roof Wednesday in anticipation of their being picked up by helicopters. When the airlift failed to materialize, the patients spent the night there. Without power or light in the building, doctors decided it was safer than moving them back inside.

Amid reports of looting and scattered gunfire, New Orleans authorities announced that the city’s police department would be shifted from rescue operations to the defense of property. Official concerns were apparently sparked as more upscale shops and hotels came under attack. Most of the so-called “looting” has consisted of desperate people lacking food, water and dry clothing entering closed stores to get what they need. Among the most common scenes has been that of young mothers coming out with packages of diapers.

Louisiana state Attorney General Charles Foti, meanwhile, announced that his office and New Orleans officials are working to set up a “temporary detention center” for jailing people arrested for looting, the *Times-Picayune* reported. Until such a lockup is organized, however, those who are arrested will be transported to Fort Polk, an army base in west central Louisiana, according to state police officials quoted by the paper.

At a Thursday afternoon press conference, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff announced that the government will be sending in 1,400 additional national guard troops into the city on each of the next three days to restore “law and order.” These troops are not relief specialists, but rather military policemen. With soldiers to outnumber civilian law enforcement by a ratio of better than five-to-one, New Orleans will be under a de facto state of martial law.

Earlier in the day, appearing on NBC’s “Today” program, Chertoff arrogantly blamed the hurricane’s victims for their plight. “The critical thing was to get people out of there before the disaster,” he said. “Some people chose not to obey that order. That was a mistake on their part.”

As even the news media has increasingly been compelled to acknowledge, the vast majority of those left in New Orleans did not stay there by choice. The reality is that the poverty rate in New Orleans approaches 30 percent, with tens of thousands of people too poor, too old or too sick to organize their own evacuation. And no attempt was made by the government to provide these people with the means to flee the city.

At a press conference in Baton Rouge, Louisiana’s Democratic Senator Mary Landrieu echoed statements made by New Orleans’s mayor, declaring, “We understand that there are thousands of dead people” in the city.

Grim accounts from those coming out of the worst-hit neighborhoods seemed to substantiate such estimates. Lucrece Phillips told the *Times-Picayune* of seeing the bodies of “dead babies and women, and young men and old men with tattered T-shirts or graying temples...floating along the streets of the Lower 9th Ward.” Rescued by boat from her attic along with five members of her family, Phillips said that the rescuers “had to push the bodies back with sticks.”



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