

Readers report on Katrina disaster

8 September 2005

Dear WSWS,

One thing that has me concerned is the martial situation in New Orleans. Military forces now substantially outnumber civilians, now mainly people who refuse to leave. There are now reports that the military is going to forcibly remove every single citizen of New Orleans, and go house to house, busting into every residence, under the guise of rescue and recovery operations. In light of what this country has become, one can only speculate what other orders certain units have. There is a huge swath of the city that has been dry since the end of the day that the hurricane passed over, which is along the river where the highest natural elevations of the city are located. The people in those locations, who have provisions, aren't in the way of rescue operations, and desire to remain on their property, should be allowed to do so. The remaining residents who remain in the safer dry areas of the city have banded together to help one another communally. Undoubtedly there are pockets of people who are still in flooded areas, who should be convinced to leave their particular neighborhoods, due to the extremely unsanitary condition of the standing water.

Here's another aspect of the tragedy: Many of the adjacent suburbs of New Orleans, the various municipalities, consist of middle and working class people, many of whom used to live or had immediate ancestors who lived in New Orleans proper, and who migrated to the suburbs since the middle of the last century, as in many other American cities, as described in the "white flight" model. Immediately after the storm, the municipalities surrounding New Orleans reportedly locked down their city limits from anyone. The towns and localities on the west bank of the Mississippi from New Orleans were said to have prohibited people from getting off of the expressway into their towns, especially the poor from New Orleans who were finally resigned to cross the Crescent City Connection by foot. This despite the fact that that in most of the west bank the waters had receded by the end of the first day after the storm. It was every locality for itself, in that immediate area.

I can't vouch for the veracity of the "exit pass" story, whether it was an official initiative, or if the local news stations here were just responding to the fears of their contributing constituency, the local news here being of the

most damnable mediocrity. It was reported very briefly, as people were being transported to Baton Rouge from New Orleans. I haven't heard it since. It was definitely reported in Baton Rouge on the local television, however, during the earlier stages of evacuation, along with rumors of everything from robberies to riots, all untrue.

I think that much of southeast Louisiana will be more receptive to the message of the SEP, now that it has taken this catastrophe to open their eyes to the fact that they have been betrayed all along by the two-party system. There is a feeling of betrayal universally down here, even from people and parishes who have never been critical of the status quo of politics.

As for the situation in Baton Rouge now, it has more than doubled in population. It seems the people here are doing what they can to cope, and help people who have evacuated here. Serious traffic problems and fuel shortages everywhere continue. People are trying to enroll their children in schools up here, for it's going to be long before kids can go back to school in New Orleans, let alone live there. All of the New Orleans universities' semesters are cancelled, so those students are trying to enroll in colleges up here as well.

The people transported out of New Orleans from the dome and convention center have filled the River Center, which is the local municipal hall, as well as certain sports facilities on the campus of Louisiana State University, which are also being used as temporary medical facilities. Baton Rouge is a de facto segregated city, with the better-off white people in the southern area, working-class whites in the eastern suburban areas, and a huge black population living in the north, divided along well-delineated lines formed by the giant university and certain east-west avenues. There was friction initially, for the officials attempted to keep the people at the River Center locked down, responding to fears of the local bourgeoisie of black people being able to just go anywhere. There was talk of having these Americans not being able to leave the facility without some kind of "exit pass." This city is one of the many down here that is accustomed to having black people "contained" in a certain area of the city, in contrast to New Orleans, which has historically been very mixed for the most part. This attempt caused a general uproar, and as far as I can tell the idea was

dropped.

As the enormity of the disaster finally and belatedly became apparent to people up here, much of the citizenry have responded quite charitably, helping people and donating according to their abilities and means. It is the decency of ordinary Americans that has made all the difference to the plight of the unfortunate ones.

RC

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

In documenting responsibility in the Chains of Command, here are some facts that are known:

First, on *Monday morning*, August 29, the Army Corps of Engineers was at the scene of the levee break. The federal government knew before Katrina had left the city to pass over Mississippi and Alabama that the levee was breached. Presumably the Pentagon received a report immediately at that time.

Fourteen hours after the federal government had their own eyewitness reports of the levee breach the Commander-in-Chief arrived in San Diego after two earlier stops. He was there to pose for the TV against a backdrop of military support for his Iraq policy, so that he could win his PR war against the weeping mother Cindy Sheehan. Top priority fourteen hours after the levee breach for the federal government on Monday was Operation Quash Cindy. Bush spoke before servicemen who were not in the act of serving New Orleans—they were not loading cargo planes with rubber rafts and relief supplies, they were not mobilizing, they were not being airlifted to be re-deployed to several existing Louisiana military bases.

Second, the mayor made the first announcement of the levee break about midnight that night (Monday) on WWL-TV, and CNN carried the story. No other network (ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC, FOX) reported it before noon on Tuesday. As late as the morning talk-news shows Tuesday morning, it was not being mentioned by federal officials. The national news was still reporting that New Orleans had “dodged the bullet.”

Websites in India, Ireland, and Africa reported the levee breach on their websites almost 12 hours before most major American news media first mentioned the fact. I know, because I looked for the news to confirm CNN’s report, that international media carried the notice but national media did not.

During the slow-motion collapse of fiber-network and telephone connections there was still time to get circulation around New Orleans that this was no ankle-deep flood but the whole lake was coming in.

Third, the Federal Government promulgated its declaration that Homeland Security was to be the lead agency for natural disasters beginning March 1st. New Orleans and Louisiana

had a right to rely on the federal government’s declaration that they were assuming responsibility. This is from the homepage of the Federal Homeland Security web site: http://www.dhs.gov/dhspublic/theme_home2.jsp

Fourth, it is undetermined how many key personnel went AWOL in New Orleans and Southern Louisiana, out of natural fear prompting flight ahead of the storm and the natural desire to be with their families in this crisis. It is utterly unknown what assets the local authorities had available to them from the moment the storm struck. There was known to be widespread desertion by police, for example.

This requires much digging and getting facts documented on the record before blame-shifting can hang some unsuspecting dupe for the negligence of those actually culpable.

This documenting process has not proceeded sufficiently one week into this affair. Memories will fade or come into dispute if these facts are not put into the record right now while they are fresh.

What exactly was available to the mayor of New Orleans to work with? What exactly was available to the governor of Louisiana to work with? Why was the local National Guard unresponsive to the immediate crisis? What were the physical obstructions preventing movement into the city from outlying areas where communities were less impacted and could muster relief help?

The Commander-in-Chief had a job to do and failed to do it. Now a fairly large fraud operation is underway to absolve him of his fair share of responsibility.

LK

Santa Rosa, California

5 September 2005



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