

New Orleans prisoners left to drown after Katrina struck

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A statement issued by Human Rights Watch reports that the New Orleans Sheriff's Department abandoned hundreds of prisoners in the Orleans Parish Prison (OPP) compound for several days after Hurricane Katrina hit on August 29. The report documents a particularly brutal example of the indifference and contempt for human life that characterized every aspect of the government's response to the disaster.

Prisoners interviewed by Human Rights Watch said they saw bodies of drowned inmates floating in the surrounding waters, and the human rights organization says many prisoners remain unaccounted for.

According to the Human Rights Watch report ("New Orleans: Prisoners Abandoned to Floodwaters"), officers who worked in building Templeman I and II, part of the OPP complex, state that prisoner evacuation commenced in their buildings on August 30, as waters began to rise to chest level. The prisoners of Templeman III were not afforded the same treatment, and were left stranded, locked in their cells, for two more days.

In interviews with Human Rights Watch, inmates of Templeman III, which had some 600 prisoners, said that they were not evacuated until Thursday, having spent three days without food or water. They said there were no correctional officers in the building to get the prisoners out.

The prison generators died, leaving the trapped inmates without lights or air circulation. The toilets ceased to function and the stench became unbearable. Those inmates on the ground floor of the prison had water up to chest level.

The situation for prisoners in Templeman III became increasingly desperate as the water continued to rise. Earrand Kelly, an inmate, told Human Rights Watch, "We was calling down to the guys in the cells under us,

talking to them every couple of minutes. They were crying, they were scared. The one that I was cool with, he was saying 'I'm scared. I feel like I'm about to drown. He was crying.'" Dan Bright, another Orleans Parish Prison inmate said, "They left us there to die."

Corinne Carey, researcher for Human Rights Watch comments, "At best, the inmates were left to fend for themselves. At worst, some may have died."

Several corrections officers told Human Rights Watch there was no evacuation plan for the prison, despite the fact that it had been evacuated during floods in the 1990s. One described the situation as "complete chaos" as the storm approached.

A spokeswoman for the Orleans Parish Sheriff's Department told Human Rights Watch she did not know whether the officers had left the building before the evacuation. She also said that search and rescue teams had gone to the prison and that "nobody drowned, nobody was left behind." However, this claim was contradicted by inmates who spoke to the human rights organization.

Many prisoners remain unaccounted for. According to the report, "Human Rights Watch compared an official list of all inmates held at Orleans Parish Prison immediately prior to the hurricane with the most recent list of the evacuated inmates compiled by the state Department of Corrections and Public Safety (which was entitled, "All Offenders Evacuated"). However, the list did not include 517 inmates from the jail, including 130 from Templeman III."

Many of the prisoners who were left in these horrible conditions were being held for minor violations, and some had not even been charged.

A September 25 article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported on the same incident. It cited a letter from Paul Kunkel, who was being held on a misdemeanor charge.

He wrote to a friend saying that guards had abandoned their posts on Sunday, the day before the hurricane hit.

“I thought I was going to die in that jail,” Kunkel wrote. “I was locked down in a cell made for two, with five people, no working toilet, no food and no protection. People were panicking, breaking windows, setting fires—anything to try to get someone’s attention from the outside. No one knew if we were forgotten. Three days later, they cut the jail bars and let us out.”

He continued, “The water was up to my chest. I was drinking that water for a day and a half. It was filthy and contaminated. But I did not know what else I could do. I wanted to live.”

The trauma for the inmates did not end when they finally made it out of the prison. Boats were used to move them to the Broad Street overpass. The *Post-Gazette* cited a letter from Robie Waganfeald, a friend of Kunkel, who wrote to his father, “I sat in the sun from 8 am to 6 pm—10 hours—[with] no water and with National Guardsmen threatening to shoot people. Some [prisoners] got hit with rubber bullets, others with pepper spray. It was the most humiliating, unjustifiable thing I’ve ever seen.”

While Waganfeald was moved to another corrections facility six hours away, Kunkel was taken to a fenced-in field in Elayne Hunt Correctional Centre near New Orleans, where he was held for another four days along with several thousand other prisoners. He gave the following description of the conditions there:

“We lived in 90-degree-plus sun with no protection from the elements. One day it poured, and the ground was wet and muddy. We were given one blanket, and we were freezing at night... Inmates were stealing blankets, and convicts were armed with homemade knives. There were no sanitary facilities. It was like a concentration camp. I [was] very afraid.”

Cynthia Meyers, Kunkel’s friend, commented that the two prisoners “were part of a number of people who didn’t do anything serious but were left to drown. The pet animals have been treated better than those inmates. It says to me there is a total lack of compassion for these [people].”



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