

Hurricane Katrina two years on

Part 1: New Orleans—A city in social and economic distress

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The following is the first in a series of articles on the second anniversary of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Future installments will deal with housing conditions, the state of the levee system, profiteering in the Gulf Opportunity Zone and other issues.

Two years ago, on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the US Gulf Coast. Nearly every levee in metropolitan New Orleans was breached as the storm passed to the east, flooding more than three quarters of the city and neighboring communities for weeks. The Mississippi Gulf Coast sustained massive damage, as bridges, boats, homes and cars were washed inland. The devastation was spread over an estimated 95,000 square miles.

The official death toll from the storm stands at 1,836, with many more lives never accounted for, and damages sustained in the hundreds of billions of dollars. More than a million people were displaced, many never returning to their homes to this day. Even these stark figures, however, do not convey the full impact of the human suffering wrought by the Katrina disaster.

The lack of preparation for a hurricane of Katrina's strength—a category 3 storm when it hit New Orleans—and the incompetent and criminally negligent response of government authorities count as one of the greatest failings in modern US history. Victims were left to drown in the floodwaters and evacuees were crowded into squalid emergency centers, without adequate food, water or medical care. They were subjected to police brutality. Rescue efforts were bungled and delayed.

The Katrina disaster exposed the rot at the base of American capitalism. It revealed grinding poverty alongside fabulous wealth—a society torn by class divisions. The failure of the levees and other infrastructure, as well as the lack of coordination of the recovery effort, can be traced to system that subordinates the lives and welfare of its citizenry to the accumulation of personal wealth by a wealthy elite. While the hurricane was a natural phenomenon (although global warming may have played a role) the scope of the resulting disaster was man-made.

Two years on, New Orleans remains a crippled and devastated city. One statistic reported in a journal of the American Medical Association provides a staggering measure of the ongoing social catastrophe: In the first half of 2006, there was a nearly 50 percent increase in the death rate in New Orleans as compared to pre-Katrina levels.

The conditions in the poorest and most stricken neighborhoods in New Orleans, contrasted to the now bustling areas catering to tourists and the wealthy, mirror in a graphic manner the immense social divide in America. That vast sections of this major American city—a unique cultural center whose contributions include the musical form known as jazz—are being left to rot is an indictment of the ruling establishment.

The US war and occupation of Iraq continue, with estimates placing the price tag for this criminal enterprise at more than \$1 trillion. At the same time, economic and social polarization within the US is mounting. As the two big-business parties promote the “war on terror,” ostensibly to protect the American people, government authorities are no more prepared than

they were in August 2005 to shield the population from a disaster on the scale of Hurricane Katrina.

The nation marks the second anniversary of the Gulf Coast disaster following the collapse earlier of this month of the most highly traveled highway bridge in the state of Minnesota, claiming more than a dozen lives. An indication of the pervasive decay of the country's physical infrastructure is the fact that 27 percent of the nation's bridges have been designated “structurally deficient.”

There is no federally run and nationally coordinated program to rebuild the Gulf Coast. Large portions of the financial assistance promised by government authorities have never reached the victims—some of it held up by bureaucratic incompetence, and more funneled into the coffers of private contractors who have profited from no-bid contracts in the Gulf Opportunity Zone that was created in the wake of the disaster.

Of the \$116 billion the Bush administration says has been spent on Gulf Coast recovery since 2005, only 30 percent has been earmarked for long-term projects. Less than a third of the \$16.7 billion allotted in Community Development Block Grants had been spent as of August 2007.

Only 20 percent of the \$8.4 billion allocated to the US Army Corps of Engineers for levee repair had been spent by the onset of the 2007 hurricane season. Authorities admit that a storm of Katrina strength would still send waters over the walls protecting the city's Lower Ninth Ward, and there is still no plan to build up defenses to withstand a category 5 hurricane.

While the media has been quick to tout the recovery of the city's French Quarter, its gambling casinos and hotel district, the vast majority of working and poor New Orleanians exist in conditions of extreme social insecurity, where access to quality housing, education, health care and other necessities of life is precarious at best.

The official unemployment rate in the greater New Orleans metropolitan area now stands at 5.1 percent, up from 4.5 percent one year ago and down slightly from the 5.3 percent pre-Katrina jobless rate. But these figures belie the real story, as they do not reflect conditions in the most devastated sections of New Orleans and fail to take into account the thousands of jobless evacuees who have not returned.

According to a report by the Institute for Southern Studies, there are 118,000 fewer jobs available in the city of New Orleans than before the 2005 storm, when unemployment stood at 12 percent, or more than twice the national average. One-third of the city's population lived below the poverty line before Katrina, the overwhelming majority of them black. Most of the new jobs are in the restaurant, hotel and other low-wage service industries, and will do little to lift the city's poor out of poverty.

There are widespread reports of wage theft by unscrupulous reconstruction contractors. This is especially true for the thousands of immigrant, mostly Latino, workers who came to the area in the aftermath of the hurricane in search of employment, some of whom found themselves trapped by employers in conditions of virtual slavery. The US Labor Department has recovered \$5.4 million in wages from contractors

who failed to pay their workers.

The reality facing New Orleanians is a far cry from the vision promoted by President Bush on September 15, 2005, when he declared from the city's deserted Jackson Square, "Americans want the Gulf Coast not just to survive, but to thrive; not just to cope, but to overcome. We want evacuees to come home for the best of reasons—because they have a real chance at a better life in a place they love."

Two years later, many former residents have not been able to return, and those who have face the difficult task of rebuilding their lives under conditions where the city's social and physical infrastructure remains in extreme distress. Of New Orleans' pre-hurricane population of 455,000, an estimated 40 percent have not returned. The main reasons cited by displaced residents are the lack of affordable housing and the scarcity of decent jobs.

Only about 1,500 of the 5,100 public housing units in use before Katrina are currently occupied, and authorities have slated another 3,000 for demolition. Rental rates in the most severely storm-damaged parishes of Louisiana and Mississippi have doubled or tripled. More than 80,000 displaced hurricane survivors are still living in trailers provided by FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency).

In the severely hit Lower Ninth Ward, only about 1,000 of 19,000 former residents have returned, and the majority of homes stand empty. Less than half of the 66,000 pre-storm residents of nearby St. Bernard Parish have returned.

Neighborhoods like Gentilly have block after block of vacant houses. Residents struggling to put their lives back together in these poorly populated areas have to travel significant distances to shop, send their children to school or seek medical care. This is extremely burdensome for those without cars, as there is no reliable public transportation outside the downtown and tourist areas.

In November 2005, the Louisiana legislature authorized the state to assume control of 107 of 128 schools in the Orleans district and set up the Recovery School District (RSD), citing the prevalence of "academically unacceptable" schools in the aftermath of the flood.

The Bush administration and state authorities seized on the tragedy of Katrina to overhaul the city's schools and institute a system dominated by charter schools—publicly funded schools run by for-profit or non-profit groups. Seventy percent of the city's schools have now become charter schools.

When families return to the city, they often find that their children cannot attend their neighborhood school because it no longer exists, is overcrowded with students from other parts of the city, or has been transformed into a charter school with a selective admissions policy. Students who wind up in the RSD schools face overcrowded classrooms, a lack of textbooks, and often more security guards than teachers.

Poor and working class residents also confront what can only be classified as a health care emergency. Medical professionals describe a situation in which patients are literally dying from a lack of hospital beds, mental health facilities and functioning community clinics.

The area has lost seven of its 22 pre-Katrina hospitals, and the number of hospital beds has been cut in half. Of the seven general hospitals in New Orleans before Katrina, only one is operating at pre-storm levels. Louisiana State University mothballed Charity Hospital—the major provider for indigent and uninsured patients before the storm—after it sustained major flood damage.

The estimated 98,000 people without health insurance in Orleans, Jefferson, Plaquemines and St. Bernard Parishes now must scramble for medical care. They are often referred to charity hospitals in other parts of the state, where waiting times can last for months. A new hospital under construction in downtown New Orleans dedicated to research, teaching and care for the uninsured is not expected to open until 2012.

The medical community says that survivors continue to die from

multiple effects of the storm—including psychological and physical problems, financial stress, fears of crime and violence. Dr. Kevin Stephens, director of the New Orleans Health Department, commented to the Associated Press, "Years from now, when they talk about post-traumatic stress, New Orleans after Katrina will be the poster child."

A study co-authored by Stephens published in the July 2007 issue of *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, a journal of the American Medical Association, reported a 47 percent increase in the New Orleans death rate in January-June 2006, when compared to the 2002-2004 average.

Louisiana authorities attempted to refute this staggering statistic by compiling a tally of local death notices, which showed little increase in the death rate. The study's authors countered that the state's figures did not include people who were too frail to return to Louisiana after being evacuated and died elsewhere.

The Associated Press reported one such tragedy: the case of Sylvester Major, who escaped from his flooded home, survived harrowing days at the convention center, and ended up in Oklahoma, where he died 10 months later of congestive heart failure at the age of 59. Major's family contends he died as a result of the impact of the hurricane and the loss of his elderly mother, who also died after being evacuated.

Major's brother, Ellis Coleman Jr., commented, "Being away from most things we love, the people we're used to... it had to take a toll on him. He just didn't have the will to go on. He lost the spark."

Local mental health professionals are seeing an explosion of mental health problems among residents. Leah Hendrick, a social worker at Ochsner Hospital, told the Associated Press, "We're seeing triple the number of people with mental health problems as we were before Katrina. Depression, suicidal [impulses], anxiety, abuse of drugs and alcohol, and along with that comes a lot more physical problems."

The mental health crisis for those living in "temporary" FEMA trailers in Louisiana and Mississippi is even more severe. According to a study by the International Medical Corps, these hurricane survivors are 15 times more likely to commit suicide than people in the rest of the US, and are seven times more prone to depression. The study also found women living in the trailers experience triple the national rate of domestic violence and are nearly 54 times more likely to report being raped.

One of the few aspects of New Orleans life to recover to near pre-Katrina levels is the city's police department, which is staffed close to what it was in 2005, with a budget to match. The local police force has been beefed up with the addition of 60 Louisiana state troopers and 300 National Guard troops patrolling in Humvees and military uniforms—at a cost of \$35 million to the state.

New Orleans led the US in homicides in 2006, with 161 murders, or a rate of 63.5 killings per 100,000 residents, based on a generous population estimate of 255,000. With more than 150 murders so far this year, the homicide rate is 15 times that of New York City and is poised to lead the nation again.

The city also has double the national rate of prisoners, and the highest incarceration rate of any major US city. Police are making a record number of arrests, averaging over 1,300 a week. Most arrests are for nonviolent crimes, mainly related to simple drug possession and alcohol use, fuelled by poverty and the lack of jobs.

Those being rounded up are overwhelmingly African-American and young, and the vast majority are held at the Orleans Parish Prison (OPP), a facility that epitomizes the brutality and contempt for ordinary people exhibited by government authorities in their response to the Katrina disaster.

OPP held 8,000 inmates when the hurricane hit, and prison officials abandoned hundreds of them as waters rose to chest level and higher. Prisoners reported seeing the bodies of inmates floating in the floodwaters surrounding the prison, and many have never been accounted for to this

day.

To be continued



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