

The Hurricane and Bush's Criminal Negligence

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IAC - September 1, 2005--With every hour that passes, we see and hear new stories of the horror and devastation in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. What makes these images more shocking is the realization that much of the death and destruction could have been prevented. Almost all of the death and destruction arising from the hurricane is the direct result of criminal neglect by the Bush Administration. This crisis was predicted in numerous reports and news articles and little, if anything, was done.

International Action Center

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International Action Center (New York)

Bush Slashed Flood Protection

Bush sent emergency personnel and equipment to Iraq

Bush's role in global warming Oil Profiteering

Bush failed to develop an evacuation plan

No emergency relief program, even now

Statement from the International Action Center

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While natural disasters are beyond our control, the preparation for expected and predicted disasters is something that we can control. Natural disasters do not have to be catastrophes if plans are made in advance to protect people and their homes, but these plans were not made.

We cannot discuss the effects of this catastrophe without noting that those who have suffered most are people of color. Seventy percent of New Orleans' residents are Black, as are a major part of the population of the surrounding area affected by the hurricane. The fact that absolutely no preparations were made for their evacuation, that no thought was given to meeting their basic emergency needs in the wake of the storm, and that even now they have been abandoned and ignored by the government, lays bare the racism at the core of U.S. society and at the heart of the policies of George W. Bush. The criminal negligence displayed by all levels of government preceding and during this crisis sends a clear message that, to those in power, the lives of poor people, especially poor Black people, are of absolutely no concern.

President Bush has diverted funds that were needed to prepare for this type of natural disaster to fund a war of conquest in Iraq. He did this despite being warned of the potential for danger by FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) as early as 2001. The Houston Chronicle reported on Dec. 1, 2001: "New Orleans is sinking. And its main buffer from a hurricane, the protective Mississippi River delta, is quickly eroding away, leaving the historic city perilously close to disaster. ...So vulnerable, in fact, that earlier this year the Federal Emergency Management Agency ranked the potential damage to New Orleans as among the three likeliest, most catastrophic disasters facing this country."

The Bush Administration knew of the danger and they knew how to prepare for it. But they chose to do little or nothing ? they actually slashed funding for preventative and emergency measures, leaving the people of the region helpless to deal with the inevitable disaster. Now, with the destruction of New Orleans and numerous surrounding communities, tens of thousands of people are without food, water, or electricity. Thousands of homes are destroyed and the death toll continues to climb.

This is a disaster of unprecedented proportion. It is poor and working people, particularly people of color, who are suffering the most from this disaster.

No preparation

It was clear from watching the disaster unfold that no real plans had been made for evacuating the region, even though everyone, including Federal authorities and meteorologists, knew that a hurricane of enormous magnitude was descending on the area.

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For the elderly, the handicapped, the poor, there was no provision for evacuation or shelter. It was "everyone for themselves," and those who didn't have the ability to flee or the means to finance their own evacuation were left to perish. There were no arrangements for more than 100,000 people in New Orleans - 20 % of the population and overwhelmingly the poorest part of the population. Those with out cars, credit cards, and hotel reservations had few alternatives but to stay home and face the coming deluge. The death toll continues to mount, and it becomes more and more apparent how little the government is concerned for human life, particularly the lives of poor and working people.

There were many obvious things that could have and should have been done if the government were concerned about the lives of the people. Trains, airlines, buses, and other transportation could have been put to use evacuating people. Convention centers, hotels, and college dormitories throughout the region could have been used for shelter. The government uses eminent domain to take working people's property for the benefit of corporate developers; this would have been an excellent opportunity to use eminent domain in a way that actually benefits people.

Because there was no plan for evacuation, more than 20,000 people were herded into the Superdome without adequate food, shelter, water, or medical care for days. The New York Times said, "By Wednesday, the stench was staggering. Heaps of rotting garbage in bulging white plastic bags baked under a blazing Louisiana sun on the main entry plaza, choking new arrivals as they made their way into the stadium after being plucked off rooftops and balconies. The odor billowing from toilets was even fouler. Trash spilled across corridors and aisles, slippery with smelly mud and scraps of food."

Videos of the situation (see below) show just how desperate the situation is?people are without food, water, and medicine .Bodies are piling up on the streets. The people have been absolutely abandoned by the government.

Only massive immediate Federal intervention can relieve the situation. The government has access to stockpiles of food and medicines and it has cargo planes and helicopters to deliver them. Yet the Administration has chosen not to act while people are dying.

Slashing emergency preparations to fund war and tax cuts for the wealthy

Knowing that a hurricane of this strength was eventually inevitable, the Bush Administration slashed the budget of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the area by \$71.2 million. This cut eliminated hurricane and flood protection projects as well as a study to determine ways to protect the region from a Category 5 hurricane. This cut was part of the Bush policy of slashing essential programs to pay for a tax cut for the wealthy and for the occupation of Iraq.

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Comparing the cuts of more than \$71 million for flood protection to the \$1.7 billion taken from the people of Louisiana for the war in Iraq yields one more example of how the Bush policy of endless war endangers the population here.

The Aug. 30 Editor and Publisher revealed that \$250 million in crucial projects planned by the Army Corps of Engineers in the delta for shoring up levees and building pumping stations could not be carried out. The Corps never tried to hide the fact that the spending pressures of the war in Iraq, as well as homeland security coming at the same time as federal tax cuts was the reason for the strain.

The 2004 hurricane season was the worst in decades. In spite of that, the federal government came back this spring with the steepest reduction in hurricane and flood-control funding for New Orleans in history.

Emergency Specialists and Equipment sent to Iraq

The National Guard, who would normally be deployed to aid in evacuation and disaster relief, is unable to respond adequately because 40% of the Mississippi National Guard 35% of the Louisiana National Guard is in Iraq. So is much of their equipment, including dozens of high water vehicles, humvees, refuelers and generators that are essential to dealing with this type of emergency.

According to the Washington Post, "With thousands of their citizen-soldiers away fighting in Iraq, states hit hard by Hurricane Katrina scrambled to muster forces for rescue and security missions yesterday -- calling up Army bands and water-purification teams, among other units, and requesting help from distant states and the active-duty military."

Many of the members of the National Guard are also emergency medical technicians and firefighters. They should be at home helping their neighbors recover from this disaster, not in Iraq maintaining an illegal occupation.

Contempt for Environment exacerbates disaster

The flooding is exacerbated by the elimination of wetlands, which provide a natural buffer. The Bush Administration has removed Federal protection from as much as 20 million acres of wetlands. The Bush Administration has demonstrated utter disregard for human life and contempt for international law by refusing to abide by the 1997 Kyoto accord, a treaty signed by the United States and 54 other nations. The agreement is designed to limit emissions that

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cause global warming.

Sir David King, the British Government's chief scientific adviser, says that global warming may be responsible for the devastation reaped by Hurricane Katrina. "The increased intensity of hurricanes is associated with global warming. We have known since 1987 the intensity of hurricanes is related to surface sea temperature and we know that, over the last 15 to 20 years, surface sea temperatures in these regions have increased by half a degree centigrade. So it is easy to conclude that the increased intensity of hurricanes is associated with global warming."

Loss of life is avoidable ? Cuba a U.N. model

The massive loss of life in Louisiana and Mississippi was avoidable, if those making decisions were interested in funding emergency measures rather than spending money on war and occupation. Cuba lies directly in the path of many hurricanes, and yet the loss of life is usually minimal, because the government has systems in place to aid orderly evacuations, provide emergency shelter, and look after the elderly, the handicapped, and the poor.

In 2001, when Hurricane Michelle, a level-4 storm, hit with sustained 125-mile-per-hour winds and widespread floods, more than 700,000 people were evacuated. Only five Cubans lost their lives in the storm.

In September 2004, Cuba endured Ivan, the fifth-largest hurricane ever to hit the Caribbean, with sustained winds of 124 miles per hour. Cuba evacuated almost 2 million people--more than 15 percent of the total population. One hundred thousand people were evacuated within the first three hours. An incredible 78 percent of those evacuated were welcomed into other people's homes. Children at boarding schools were moved. Animals and birds were moved. No one was killed. The UN declared this to be a model of disaster preparation.

Cuba, a country blockaded and isolated by the U.S. for 45 years has been able to evacuate millions of people in an orderly fashion without loss of life. Natural disasters do not have to be catastrophes.

Oil profiteering

Beyond the horrific loss of life and homes in the region, working people everywhere will suffer as they pay more than \$3.00 per gallon for gas, as oil companies rake in record profits. In some places, gas has reached as much as \$5.00 per gallon.

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Releasing oil from the Strategic Oil Reserves could easily offset the loss of oil refineries in the region. Nearly 700 million barrels of oil are stored in underground salt caverns along the Texas and Louisiana Gulf Coast. This reserve was established to cushion oil markets during energy disruptions or other emergencies, and sitting on the oil rather than releasing it only keeps the price of gas high and ensures greater profits for the oil companies.

While George W. Bush and his friends at the Big Oil companies are growing rich from escalating oil prices, while working people, who are already suffering from the economic policies of the Bush Administration, have to spend more of their shrinking paychecks to pay for gas to get to work and school.

Venezuela offers to help while Washington refuses to act

President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela has demonstrated more concern for working and poor people in the U.S. than George Bush has. Chavez has announced that Venezuela will be offering poor people discounted gas through its Citgo chain.

He has also offered to send more than \$1 million in oil, food, and equipment to the region. In addition, the Venezuelan government is offering two mobile hospital units, each capable of assisting 150 people, 120 specialists in rescue operations, 10 water purifying plants, 18 electricity generators of 850 KW each, 20 tons of bottled water, and 50 tons of canned food.

A senior U.S. State Department official said he was not aware of the Venezuelan offer, and then dismissed it as "counterproductive."

The real looting: Bush Administration steals from working people to fund war and corporate greed

Rather than focusing on criminal neglect by the Federal and State governments, the corporate media is reporting that the real danger is looting. In an attempt to shift blame from the policies of the Bush Administration, the news networks are demonizing the victims. In a blatant appeal to racism, those being portrayed as "looters" on the news are without exception black males.

Tens of thousands of poor people have been stranded by a policy of neglect. Many are without food, fresh water, baby formula, and medicine, and the government has refused to provide even basic relief.

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The real looters are not the hungry people taking what they need from an abandoned corporate superstore. The real crime is that they were left in this situation by a government that puts war and corporate profits ahead of human needs. The Bush regime has looted billions of dollars of the people's money, slashing programs that provide basic necessities and robbing from agencies that are tasked with preparing for natural disasters in order to fund a war of conquest against the people of Iraq. There are dangerous looters, but they are Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld, not the poor people of New Orleans trying to feed their families. It is clear that the Bush Administration is increasingly putting the entire population of the country in growing danger by relentlessly slashing every social program, infrastructure maintenance program, and environmental protection program.

Money for Human Needs not War!

It is the Bush Administration, and the Big Corporations it serves, who are directly responsible for the disaster, and they, not the working people of the region, should be responsible for rebuilding and providing relief. In a speech on Wednesday, President Bush said, "our hearts and prayers are with our fellow citizens along the Gulf Coast who have suffered so much from Hurricane Katrina. "But the people of the region need food, clothing, shelter, and jobs, not hearts and prayers.

He grinned as he said, "Recovery will take years," but offered no plan to assist in that rebuilding. The people of the area need, and are entitled to, more than empty rhetoric and vacant smiles. The crisis demands a massive national mobilization to meet emergency needs and facilitate rebuilding efforts. The disaster is beyond the scope of local authorities or private charities to handle; the Federal government must devote its ample resources, which are now being used to wage war, to provide immediate and long-term relief.

We call on the Bush Administration to:

*Stop funding war and occupation. Use the money instead to fund emergency relief and rebuilding.

*Erase the debts incurred by working people who had to pay for gas and emergency shelter because of the government's refusal to plan for evacuation.

*Provide emergency unemployment relief to the tens of thousands who have lost their jobs because of the devastation.

*Immediately exercise eminent domain to use all available space to provide emergency and long-term shelter to those left homeless.

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*Provide a massive jobs program at union wages for rebuilding. Millions of unemployed workers could be hired to help construct housing, schools, and other public facilities.

*Food, water, clothing, medical supplies, and other necessities should be immediately commandeered for the emergency from agribusiness, supermarket chains, and pharmaceutical companies. Government food storage supplies in warehouses throughout the country should be made available immediately.

(From the International Action Center, New York)