

The Forgotten Ones (Katrina)

by Mumia Abu-Jamal

Amidst the blizzard of congressional, bureaucratic, and administrative reports on Hurricane Katrina, the only thing left out is what was left out from the very first day — and every single day thereafter — the People.

It has been six months after the nation's worst natural (and political) disaster, and still, things are as unstable, as unsure, as chaotic for the tens of thousands of people, who were too poor to leave during the night of the catastrophe.

There it was, right there on CNN the afternoon of December 6. Ishmael Mohammed, an attorney for the People's Hurricane Relief Fund, quoted a young woman named Denise, talking about her experience in the New Orleans Superdome: "The National Guard did not serve or protect. They were constantly threatening us and herding us by machine guns like cows. I saw a teenage boy beaten up by a National Guard officer in front of a crowd of thousands of people." Denise confirmed accounts of "white and Asian tourists... rushed quietly out one side of the barricade that held thousands of exhausted, financially underprivileged black families with babies." Tammy, a thirty-something African-American woman who was attempting to escape the city by car, said police stopped, arrested and jailed her and her two daughters for weeks. "Lie down on the ground, you black monkey bitch," she claims one of them yelled. Patricia Thompson, a 53-year-old New Orleans evacuee, testified that soldiers aimed their machine gun target lasers at her granddaughter's forehead, and that New Orleans cops routinely spat racist insults at storm victims. Others spoke of looting and gratuitous murder by police gone berserk.

— Ted Rall, on *Yahoo! News* Op-ed

While politicians fight over air time, and report after report is issued, the mostly Black residents of the city (especially those who dwelled in the lower 9th Ward) are spread across the country, fighting FEMA for housing funds, seeking jobs, trying to put their lives together.

Meanwhile, corporate and city planning agencies are writing off vast areas of the 9th, and planning for a New New Orleans, one that will be, shall we say, a good deal less chocolate.

Many former residents are crunched into tiny hotel rooms, some are squeezed into private homes, some are even homeless, while 100,000 trailers acquired by FEMA stand idle, empty, unused.

It is a telling measure of social and class difference, that when so many people are living in such distress, the white corporate media goes into a silly cycle because the city's mayor told a group of Katrina survivors that New Orleans would be a 'chocolate city' again.

A recent study on the future of New Orleans suggests that the 'New' New Orleans will be whiter, and wealthier than the city which was struck by the winds and waters of Katrina. The study, headed by John R. Logan, entitled "The Impact of Katrina: Race and Class in Storm-Damaged Neighborhoods"*, shows how 80% of black New Orleanians may never return. Indeed, nearly 50% of white working class residents may not return either.

Logan, a sociology professor at Brown University, reports that local and state political and business leaders are looking to make sure that New Orleans has a new constituency. Remember the high and lofty promises that were spit into microphones when Katrina was still news? Words, blather, promises.

There's another reason why monies promised have never really reached the Crescent City: War. The Iraq War is like a fiscal vacuum cleaner, sucking up every buck not nailed down.

Hurricane Katrina has also spawned another, little-discussed problem: the profound toxicity that abounds in the region, where lead, arsenic, crude oil, benzene, and dozens of other substances have leached into the earth, into brick, and into the tropical air.

One is reminded of the 9/11 attacks, when city and federal officials assured residents that the wafting white dust wasn't a health danger to those breathing in Manhattan. Now, years later, we know that these were lies, designed to give false peace to people in peril.

Katrina, although on the back burners of most news agencies, lives in the minds of millions as the worst of America when it involves Blacks in distress.

Recently, an African activist living in Paris told how, when questioned about the recent riots in France, turned the tables, as Brima Conteh explained. "We had a couple of African Americans who want-ed to come over to see us during the riots, and the

first question we asked them was, ‘We want to know what you’re doing about Katrina.’

“Even in France, people say, look the U.S. this and that — the U.S. is seen on a different level despite the racism. But people started asking questions, if you have these big Black American stars, what the hell is happening over there?”**

The images of Katrina have not faded. They echo around the earth, bouncing off satellites, teaching, telling, revealing...

In the very beginning the images told us that this nation, the richest since Rome, didn’t really give a damn about Black poor people. It has been half a year, and that message resonates, today, just as clearly as it did yesterday.

**www.s4.brown.edu/Katrina/report.pdf **From: Tram Nguyen, “Lessons From France: African Activist Brima Conteh Talks About the Roots and Reverberations of the Unrest in Paris”, Colorlines, Spr. ’06, p. 9. Article reprinted from www.mumia.org; used by permission.*