

“THIS IS CRIMINAL”

A combined report by Leopold, Cohen, Sustar, Solomon, Lobe, Flaherty, Rahim; Znetnews, 31 August –4 September 2005

In the refugee camp I just left, on the I-10 freeway, thousands of people (at least 90% black and poor) stood and squatted in mud and trash behind metal barricades, under an unforgiving sun, with heavily armed soldiers standing guard over them. While the rich escaped New Orleans, those with nowhere to go and no way to get there were left behind. Adding salt to the wound, the local and national media have spent the last week demonising those left behind. This disaster is one that was constructed out of racism, neglect and incompetence. Race has always been the undercurrent of state politics. And the hurricane was the inevitable spark igniting the gasoline of cruelty and corruption. From the neighbourhoods left most at risk, to the treatment of the refugees to the media portrayal of the victims, this disaster is shaped by race.

Images of New Orleans's hurricane-ravaged population were transformed into black, out-of-control, criminals. No sane person should classify someone who takes food from indefinitely closed stores in a desperate, starving city as a 'looter', while depicting a white person doing exactly the same as merely 'looking for and finding food'. The hyper-exploited people of NO, predominantly Afro-American, are being used as a scapegoat to cover up much larger crimes. State and

national politicians are the real criminals here. The danger faced by flooding to NO has been widely known for decades, yet federal government officials have consistently refused to spend the money to protect this poor, overwhelmingly black, city.

Despite more than four hurricanes that have whipped through NO since 2002, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake, and personal pleas to the president to provide much needed funding to rebuild the Louisiana's rapidly disappearing wetlands and maintain the levees, the Bush administration deliberately turned a blind eye. While FEMA and others warned of the urgent impending danger to NO and put forward proposals for funding to reinforce and protect the city, the Bush administration, in every year since 2001, has cut or refused to fund NO flood control, and ignored scientists' warnings of increased hurricanes. And as the dangers rose with the floodlines, the lack of coordinated response dramatized vividly the callous disregard of our neocon leaders. Today the government is pretending the hurricane and floodings have been an unexpected one-time occurrence.

The cruelty with which the government deprived the NO area of funding it needed to rebuild wetlands and reinforce its long-threatened levee-system is a very much calculated and by no means an isolated phenomenon. The soaring costs of the Iraqi war, combined with Bush's huge tax cuts and a dangerously narrow definition of 'homeland security', translated directly into sharp

reductions in the amount of government money that was made available for the battered area's hurricane-and flood-control projects over the last several years. This federal neocon politics left the city of NO alone with a \$581 million shortfall for flood control and coastal erosion improvement projects. In addition, the Bush administration's effective downgrading of Federal Emergency Management Agency, as well as the absence of at least one-third of the National Guard forces and their equipment, also due to their deployment in Iraq, proved to be disastrous. On top of Washington neocons lining their pockets with national-tax payers' money to finance their own private profiteering projects abroad and at home, why all this extensive neglect? New Orleans is one of the poorest cities in the US, with the population that is 67 per cent Afro-American and where 34 percent of households live below the federal poverty line. NO simply cannot afford to vote Republican.

In this free-market dominated US, nobody has bothered to devise a plan to evacuate the city's poorest or most infirm residents. Bush's agenda is to cut government services to the bone and make people rely on the private sector for the things that they might need. So when the officials announced everybody should evacuate, everybody was expected to devise their own way out of the disaster area by private means. Those who were too poor to afford the travel were promptly depicted by the media as 'refusing' to evacuate, or 'choosing' to stay, because they were just plain 'stubborn'.

There would be simply none of the collectivistic regimented evacuation as occurred in Cuba. When an especially powerful hurricane hit that island last year, the Castro government evacuated 1.3 million people, more than 10 percent of the country's population, with not a single life lost, a heartening feat that went largely unnoticed in the US press. Also, how could Fema and Homeland Security not have something so basic as bottled drinking water in the SuperDome, which was long a part of the hurricane plan? Interestingly, two years ago, NO residents –the only area in the entire state that voted in huge numbers against the candidacy of Bush – also fought off attempts to privatise the drinking water supply. Long before its latest hurricane-related natural disaster, NO was clearly hit by a hurricane of poverty, racism, disinvestment, reindustrialisation and corruption. Meanwhile the covering up of the federal government's responsibility and its free-market oriented ruthless corporate policies that stand to benefit a few at the expense of the many continues unhindered in the media outlets. While African Americans in NO continue to be portrayed as looters, it is worth remembering, according to those volunteers working on the ground, that, '90 percent of the so called looters are simply grabbing water, food, diapers and medicines, because the federal state officials have refused to provide these basic necessities. It's only because of the so called looters that non-looters – old people, sick people, small children – are

able to survive. Those people who stole televisions and large non-emergency items have been SELLING THEM, so they could get enough money to leave the area.' Four days after the hurricane hit, media began talking about the failure of the rescue operation, forgetting one crucial thing: There has never been any rescue operation. In its place one can find plenty of property protection, though.

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