

After the floods

The Hindu

BY ANJALI KAMAT

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The post-Katrina landscape of New Orleans provides a window into the shameful history of American poverty, injustice, slavery, and racial segregation.

Two years ago Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans and most of the Gulf Coast. Since then, President George Bush has found time for more than a dozen visits to New Orleans. Every politician worth his or her salt has waxed eloquent about making reconstruction of the battered coastline a national priority.

The federal government claims to have provided \$114 billion dollars to rebuild the Gulf coast. Foundations and corporations gave a billion dollars in hurricane relief and the American Red Cross alone was entrusted with over \$2 billion in donations. You would think that the birthplace of jazz would be booming with all this attention and generosity.

It is booming. But only for the tourists, the rich residents, and those profiting from the opportunities created by nature's fury and governmental negligence.

For the majority of those who lived in this city that used to be over 70 percent African-American, life is quantifiably worse. They are homeless, scattered across the country, or living in formaldehyde-contaminated trailers provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Their loved ones were either swept away by the hurricane or lost to Louisiana's sprawling prison system — a state with the highest incarceration rate in the world. Their public schools have been replaced by a new system of private schools catering to the select few.

And none of the reconstruction companies that flocked to New Orleans wants to hire them. Why should they, when they can rely on an invisible population of an estimated 100,000 undocumented migrant labourers working in what has been described as slave-like conditions?

The other side

Visiting the post-Katrina landscape of New Orleans is a bit like time travel. It's a crash course in the long and shameful history of American poverty, injustice, slavery, and racial segregation. But it's also a window into the future of what other cities in the United States and perhaps across the world could soon look like. That privatised, gentrified, and militarised future is unmistakably bleak and terrifying.

Not unlike the impact of the Asian Tsunami of December 2004, most of those directly affected by the hurricane and its aftermath were among the poorest. The most impoverished low-lying areas of New Orleans were the first to flood when the storm surge caused the faultily-built system of levees to give way in 20 places.

The Lower Ninth Ward, a predominantly working-class African American neighbourhood, was the worst affected. When the levees broke, entire blocks were wiped out. A barge came crashing in, flattening three blocks of homes and trees in its path. The flood force dragged houses up from foundations, flung cars on top of trees, and left hundreds of people calling for help, even as they were drowning in the angry tide.

Two years after the flood, little has changed at the Lower Ninth Ward. The scene is eerily reminiscent of images from days after the hurricane.

Destroyed or demolished houses, rotting churches, and abandoned school buildings as far as the eye can see, all overrun with knee-high marsh grass. Less than 400 people have been able to return to the wasteland that was once a bustling and tight-knit community of 12,000.

Little protection

Although it was not a wealthy area, the Lower Ninth Ward boasted one of the highest rates of African-American home ownership (60 per cent) in the country. But ownership has offered little protection to displaced residents seeking to return to family homes.

In February the New Orleans City Council passed an ordinance allowing the city to demolish homes deemed an “imminent health threat”. Tracie Washington, President of the Louisiana Justice Institute, calls the demolition ordinance “arbitrary and capricious” and is filing a lawsuit against the city.

After two years of wrangling with the bureaucracy, owners who had finally received federal money to rebuild their homes returned only to find their houses demolished and their property seized by the city. Meanwhile rent prices had skyrocketed by almost 200 per cent.

Threat of demolition

The threat of demolition also hangs over public housing in other parts of the city. Unlike the Lower Ninth Ward, public housing buildings were only lightly damaged by the flood. Over 5,000 families, again primarily African Americans, lived in public housing before the storm.

Today, less than a quarter have returned home because four of the largest developments were never reopened.

Despite commissioned scientific reports to the contrary, the city continues to claim buildings as uninhabitable and is now planning to demolish them. It sold contracts to private developers who will replace the affordable housing with “mixed-income” housing — and, incongruously enough, at least two championship golf courses.

Stephanie Mingo is a 45-year-old grandmother who serves lunch at a local high school. She lived in a four-bedroom apartment at the now shuttered St. Bernard housing development. Her mother died two days after the hurricane — she fell ill at an overcrowded shelter that ran out of food and water.

The city's elite called Katrina a godsend that "cleaned up" the crime-ridden projects. But all Stephanie could talk about was how much she misses the sense of community at the projects. She now lives in Survivors Village, a rat-infested "tent city," erected in protest by former public housing residents like herself, right across the street from her old home.

Katrina also offered a rare opportunity to gut the public school system in New Orleans. Three months after the hurricane, the city fired over 6,000 staff and unionised teachers at its 128 public schools. Less than a fifth of them were reopened.

On the advice of conservative think-tanks like the American Enterprise Institute, the rest were replaced by publicly funded schools that are privately operated by contract or "charter". With a highly selective admissions policy, thousands of children — primarily poor and Black — have been left at the mercy of under-funded public schools.

Rogers Youngblood, an 18-year-old public high school student from the Lower Ninth Ward, said going to school everyday literally feels like a trip to prison. His school has more security guards than teachers.

It was not just the public schools that were militarised, but entire communities. Whereas the wealthy gated communities hired their own private security, the Lower Ninth Ward and other predominantly African-American areas were under curfew until last year.

It's a sore point for residents who were treated like criminals by the New Orleans police, the National Guard, and private security firms like Blackwater. The most infamous case of police violence was the shooting on the Danziger Bridge five days after the hurricane.

Police violence

Plainclothes police officers opened fire on two African-American families fleeing their flooded homes, killing two people including a 40-year-old mentally disabled man.

At the time, the police called them snipers and arrested one of the family members for attempting to shoot at the police. More than a year and a half later, seven officers were indicted for the killings and now await trial.

But prejudices run deep against an entire population often simply described as "looters", "gang members", "drug dealers" or "snipers."

One young member of the National Guard arrived in New Orleans in August 2005, days after completing a year of active duty in Iraq. "These people here, they're crazy, they're more violent than the Iraqis," he said. "It's a good thing we were here to control them."

A native Louisianan from a small largely white town to the north, he joined the National Guard just a few years ago, when he was 17. Anger, he admitted, was his main symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder from being stationed in Iraq. Today he and 400 other guards live at the Holiday Inn and patrol the streets of New Orleans in their humvees.

During this conversation, I was standing on top of one of the levees with Malik Rahim, a former Black Panther activist who founded Common Ground Collective, the only group to begin rebuilding homes in the Lower Ninth Ward.

He angrily ignored the National Guard's comments and pointed instead to a distant spot beyond the calm waters of the Mississippi.

"That is the history we often forget," he said. "That's where one of the earliest communities of free Blacks lived. Right here in our New Orleans."

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