

No Shelter From the Storm Destroying the Human Right to Housing in Post Katrina New Orleans

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In late August of 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita left a path of destruction and serious human rights concerns in their wake. The storms displaced hundreds of thousands of people living in the Gulf Coast region of the United States, who consequently were entitled to the human rights protections defined by the UN's Guiding Principles on the Rights of Internally Displaced People. One of those rights is the right to return to their homes. Government actions at the local, state and federal level, however, all appear to be designed to prevent poor communities from coming home.

One of the gravest post Katrina and Rita threats to human rights has been government actions violating the human right to housing in New Orleans. Developers – pursuant to federal legislation – have demolished public housing units across New Orleans – the only housing affordable to thousands of families living in the city.

Who benefits from the demolition of undamaged or minimally damaged public housing?

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, as public housing residents attempted to return to their homes, most of which sustained little storm damage, they were met with police harassment, armed guards, and, in some instances, newly erected barbed wire fences.

Rather than release thousands of undamaged and minimally damaged housing units to displaced residents, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) officials, the national agency charged with oversight over public housing across the nation, boarded up homes and purposefully failed to repair the units or take steps to mitigate further mold contamination. In June 2006, HUD released plans to demolish 4,800 units of public housing, many of which were not damaged by the storms.

It is estimated that the demolitions will adversely affect **more than 20,000 people**. The demolitions are part of a larger policy initiative directed by HUD under the auspices of the national Hope VI Program and other urban renewal projects which has already drastically reduced the number of public and affordable housing units across the country.

On December 20, 2007, the New Orleans City Council approved the demolition of the four major public housing developments in the city (the Big 4): B.W. Copper, C.J. Peete, Lafitte and St. Bernard. Approximately 500 tenants and their supporters were locked out of the meeting. These residents, advocates, and members of the media were peppered sprayed, and some were even tasered. About a dozen people were arrested, including long-standing housing rights activists, for demanding that the city council allow residents to attend the meeting.

In approving the demolitions, the city council urged HUD to develop one for one replacement of affordable housing in New Orleans. Yet, as of March 7, 2008, the mayor of New Orleans, Ray Nagin, still had not received these assurances from HUD.¹ Additionally, there have been widespread reports of corruption and self dealing in connection with the demolitions in New Orleans and other projects around the country by HUD whose Secretary, Alphonso Jackson, recently resigned as a result of these allegations.²

Around the country mixed income redevelopment, based on privatization models, has typically reduced the number of units affordable to low-income families, often by as much as 80 to 90%. Hence, the demolitions and

mixed income redevelopment sends a clear message that regardless of political promises a significant majority of pre Katrina and Rita New Orleans residents — namely, low-income, and predominantly African American, public housing residents — will not be welcomed back.

Government reports confirm that half of the working poor, elderly and disabled who lived in New Orleans prior to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have not returned. Because of critical shortages in low cost housing, few expect tens of thousands of these poor and working people, who are disproportionately African American, to ever be able to return home. The African American population of New Orleans has plummeted by 57%, while the White population fell 36%, according to the census data. The areas which are fully recovering are more affluent and predominately White. New Orleans, which was 67% African American population before Hurricane Katrina, is estimated to be no higher than 58% African American now.

Meanwhile, the homelessness crisis in New Orleans continues. The homeless population in New Orleans is estimated at 12,000 people – double what it was before Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Solidarity with the struggle to stop the demolitions

In response to public demonstrations, calls for action and protest marches by tenants and their supporters, presidential candidates made statements expressing their concerns over the demolitions, including Senators John Edwards, Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton. Senators Edwards and Obama specifically requested a halt to the demolitions.³ Additionally, in a letter written to President George W. Bush, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi also requested a halt to the demolitions.⁴ Moreover, members of the New York City Council urged their colleagues in New Orleans to reconsider the demolitions.⁵

Despite local and national outrage, demolitions of St. Bernard and B.W. Copper began in January. On February 28, 2008 the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, Miloon Kothari, and the UN Independent Expert on minority issues, Gay McDougall, issued a joint press statement expressing serious concern over the process leading to the demolitions and calling for a halt to the ongoing demolitions.⁶ The statement expressed the UN Experts' dismay over reports of violations of international human rights law in connection with the demolitions, including the right to participation and the right to adequate housing, for former public housing residents.

The joint press statement declared: “The spiraling costs of private housing and rental units, and in particular the demolition of public housing, puts these communities in further distress, increasing poverty and homelessness.”

On March 7, 2008, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) publicly expressed its concerns over racism in the United States.⁷ In its Concluding Observations the CERD Committee charged the U.S. to do more to remedy the effects of racial discrimination in housing and other areas. The Committee noted the “disparate impact that [the] natural disaster[s] continue to have on low income African Americans” and called for local and federal governments to help Katrina's displaced.”

On April 10, 2008, New Orleans was officially adopted as a site for the International Alliance of Inhabitant's global Zero Evictions Campaign.⁸ The Stop the Demolitions and Corruption in New Orleans campaign has received support from over 400 activists and organizations spanning five continents.

Despite heroic efforts on the part of local, national and international organizations, the last of the Big 4 public housing developments was demolished on April 10, 2008. Survivors of Katrina continue to be without shelter from the storm.

ENDNOTES

¹ http://www.nesri.org/programs/NaginLetter_Vitter.pdf

² *The New York Times*, April 1, 2008. http://www.nesri.org/programs/NYT_JacksonResigns.pdf.

³ December 12, 2007, http://www.nesri.org/media_updates/Edwards_Statement.pdf December 18, 2007, http://www.nesri.org/media_updates/Obama_letter.pdf

⁴ December 14, 2007, http://www.nesri.org/media_updates/Pelosi-Reid_Letter.pdf

⁵ December 19, 2007, http://www.nesri.org/media_updates/HaltDemolitionsSupport_NYC.pdf

⁶ <http://www.unhchr.ch/hurricane/hurricane.nsf/view01/907604B6DAF5E2F1C12573FD007AD7DC?opendocument>

⁷ Released March 7, 2008. http://www.nesri.org/programs/CERD_2008.pdf

⁸ http://www.nesri.org/media_updates/IAI_NESRI_Press_Release.pdf