

Rape, murder, mayhem in New Orleans' shelter

REUTERS, AFP, New Orleans

With the rotors of President George W. Bush's helicopter sounding overhead, New Orleans' poor and downtrodden recounted tales of murder, rape, death threats and near starvation since Hurricane Katrina wrecked this city.

Death and despair still stalked stranded hurricane survivors after five days of appalling suffering and there was growing uncertainty about the future of the jazz capital.

The Army Corps of Engineers said Friday it may need up to 80 days just to drain the floodwaters from the city. "It will be 36 to 80 days to be done with the de-watering," said Brigadier General Robert Crear.

Tulane University, a top institution of higher learning in New Orleans, announced meanwhile it has cancelled its fall semester and

told its nearly 6,000 undergraduates to enrol elsewhere.

"Given the ongoing situation in the city, I am forced to make an extremely difficult decision -- Tulane University cannot hold a fall semester on its campus," university president Scott Cowen said in a statement.

US President George W. Bush, who toured storm-ravaged areas of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama on Friday amid fierce criticism of the pace of government relief efforts, has vowed to rebuild New Orleans and was to make a live radio address to the nation on Saturday at 10:00 am (1400 GMT).

Ending days of abandonment since the hurricane struck on Monday, the US National Guard handed out military rations and a bottle of water to thousands of evacuees -- the first proper meal most had eaten in days.

But as the masses lined up outside, herded by Army troops toting machine guns, inside the convention centre where these people slept since Monday was the stench of death and decay.

Leroy Fouchea, 42, waited in the sweltering heat for an hour to get his ration -- his first proper food since Monday -- and immediately handed it over to a sickly friend.

He then offered to show reporters the dead bodies of a man in a wheelchair, a young man who he said he dragged inside just hours earlier, and the limp forms of two infants, one just four months old, the other six months old.

"They died right here, in America, waiting for food," Fouchea said as he walked toward Hall D, where the bodies were put to get them out of the searing heat.

He said people were let die and left without food simply because

they were poor and that the evacuation effort earlier concentrated on the French Quarter of the city. "Because that's where the money is," he spat.

A National Guardsman refused entry.

"It doesn't need to be seen, it's a make-shift morgue in there," he told a Reuters photographer. "We're not letting anyone in there anymore. If you want to take pictures of dead bodies, go to Iraq."

As rations were finally doled out here on the day President Bush visited the devastated city, an elderly white woman and her husband collapsed from the heat.

"I had to walk two blocks to get here and I have arthritis and three ruptured discs in my back," said Selma Valenti, 80, as her husband lay beside her, being revived by a policeman in riot gear. The two had eaten nothing since Wednesday.



Bromwynne Bassier (C) cries in the street that her son has no clothes as her sister Kim Bassier (L) and local resident Kevin Miller try to console her in the midst of Hurricane Katrina damage in Biloxi, Mississippi Friday.

300 US airmen on way back from Iraq, Afghanistan

AFP, Doha/ Washington

Three hundred US airmen deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan have begun returning to Mississippi to help their families cope with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a spokesman for US Central Command Air Forces said Saturday.

"The US Central Command Air Forces is sending 300 Active Duty and Air Force Reserve Airmen home who were assigned to Keesler Air Force Base (in Biloxi, Mississippi) so they can attend to their families' needs after Hurricane Katrina," Captain David Small told AFP.

"The airmen have already begun redeploying (from Iraq and Afghanistan) and will all be home as soon as possible," he said.

"Nearly 100 airmen who were scheduled to deploy from Keesler AFB (to the Central Command area of responsibility) will not deploy now" to help with the rescue effort at home, Small said.



A volunteer walks among refugees on the floor of the Reliant Astrodome with information about lost children on Friday in Houston, Texas. The facility is being used to house 15,000 refugees who fled the destruction of Hurricane Katrina.

Health crisis grips disaster zone

REUTERS, New Orleans

Lethornia J. Whiticar was lying all alone in the end zone of New Orleans' famed Superdome stadium, very sick and in great need of help.

As relief supplies finally began arriving on Friday and other evacuees scrambled for a seat on a bus out of the flooded and devastated city, there was nothing Whiticar could do but wait.

"I want to get out of here, but I need fluid pills because I just can't stand up right now," the 52-year-old diabetes sufferer said as he lay in the end zone, his feet bloated.

A military convoy with food and emergency supplies finally reached New Orleans on Friday, but a health emergency is raging after Hurricane Katrina tore in from the Gulf of Mexico earlier this week, sending deep floodwaters surging through much of the historic city.

Thousands are feared dead, and the city's hospitals are without electricity or key medical supplies, struggling to keep critically ill patients alive.

Conditions are appalling at New Orleans' two main emergency shelters -- the Superdome and the convention center -- with abandoned dead bodies on the ground or propped up in chairs.

The stench of human faeces and urine was overwhelming, and many sick people waited listlessly on the ground or in wheelchairs to be fed and evacuated. Many complained about the federal government's slow response to the disaster.

"They left us here to die," said Tony Hatcher, a 48-year-old who looked around and pointed out a woman with a half-banded open sore on her left leg and a boy with bad skin condition on his arms. Neither had received medical attention.

Plight of survivors just begins

AFP, New Orleans

Exhausted and bedraggled, tens of thousands of survivors of Hurricane Katrina may have escaped death, but they face the stark prospect that the lives they knew may be gone forever.

Well over 100,000 refugees who lost their homes, possessions and relatives have streamed into hundreds of shelters opened across the southern United States by the American Red Cross, Red Cross officials said.

Their emotions swung between relief, anger and despair following tortuous ordeals, some of which involved harrowing tales of being plucked to safety as the bloated corpses of victims floated by in flooded streets.

"I'd go back home right now but there is nothing to go back to," said John Auzenne, 47, who fled his submerged home in New Orleans, pushing his baby in a plastic pool until they reached the relative safety of a freeway overpass.

Like 25,000 other survivors of the catastrophe, Auzenne then made his way to the city's foetid and overcrowded Superdome before being bussed Thursday to Texas where they were assigned cots in Houston's Astrodome, a 1960s sports palace converted into a giant shelter.

Texas has offered to take in 75,000 refugees from the apocalypse unleashed by the hurricane that made landfall Monday and saw New Orleans ageing dykes give way.

Some 100,000 people who escaped the disaster zone in New Orleans and on the US Gulf Coast are camping in Red Cross shelters in 13 southern states as they wait to learn their fate, Deborah Goldberg of the American Red Cross told AFP.

Tens of thousands more -- disaster officials cannot estimate exactly how many -- have moved into other shelters, relatives' homes, churches and hotels.

For many, the heart-stopping realisation is dawning that they may

never be able to go home following the catastrophe that produced scenes of Third World anguish in the world's richest and most powerful country.

"There's nothing to go back to, we'll go back to visit, see if there's something to salvage," said Earl Clark, a 45-year-old waiter from New Orleans' famed French quarter, one of the home of jazz and Cajun mystique.

"It hit me yesterday. We're going to have to relocate. Where? We'll see who gets a job first," he said in the Florida city of Pensacola -- where he arrived, along with thousands of other evacuees -- with an overnight bag and the expectation that he would be home within days.

As Louisiana politicians said the death toll would likely pass 10,000, with thousands still stranded in the city now overrun by looters and lawlessness, the chances of returning to New Orleans were slim.

Black victims spark US race debate

AFP, Washington

The horrifying television images of the ravages wrought by Hurricane Katrina have sparked a thorny race debate in the United States as it becomes clear that most of its victims are black.

The inescapable fact that African Americans are the hardest hit by the biblical-scale disaster has prompted suspicions of racial discrimination by the authorities in the widely criticised rescue operation.

"If these people hadn't been poor and black, they wouldn't have been left in New Orleans in the first place," said Louisiana Congressman William Jefferson, stressing that most of the victims were unable to flee because they did not have cars or cash to pay for hotels.

"In New Orleans, the poorest and most desperate people are black people, and there are no two ways

around that. And, so, consequently the response time and all of the rest of it -- I don't know if it has anything to do with the fact that people are black," Jefferson told MSNBC television.

New Orleans is a city of around 1.4 million people, 67.3 percent of whom are black and 30 percent of whom live below the poverty line. Nationally, 13 percent of Americans are black and 12.7 percent of them live in poverty.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the most powerful black woman in the country, weighed in on the mounting debate, denying that discrimination had played any part in the handling of the catastrophe.

"I really do believe that people know that Americans don't want Americans to suffer," she told a press conference Friday.

"That Americans would somehow in a colour-affected way decide who to help and who not to help -- I just don't believe it. Americans are generous to each other," she said adding that emotions in the country were running high.

Meanwhile, civil rights leader Jesse Jackson Friday fired off a fierce attack on President George W. Bush over Hurricane Katrina and claimed black people were being locked out of top relief roles.

Jackson raised the sensitive issue of race, simmering below the surface in New Orleans, even before the hurricane tragedy, pointing out that many of those trapped in the city by the storm were poor and black.

"There is a historical indifference to the pain of poor people, and black people ... we seem to adjust more easily to black pain."

India happy with progress of talks Pakistan wants Kashmir focus

REUTERS, Islamabad

India said on Friday it was pleased with progress in South Asia peace talks, despite concerns over infiltration of Islamic militants in Kashmir, but Pakistan urged greater focus to resolve the dispute over the territory.

Foreign secretaries from the nuclear-armed rivals held talks in Islamabad on Thursday to review a peace process relaunched in early 2004 and to prepare for a summit in New York this month.

A joint statement on Friday expressed satisfaction at the progress so far and laying out a future schedule for talks.

Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran told a news conference the current dialogue process was proving "a very useful instrument in bridging differences between the

two countries".

But he reiterated to President Pervez Musharraf Indian concerns about militant infiltration from Pakistani Kashmir.

"I, of course, drew attention to the fact that on-the-ground infiltration and violence continues and it is our hope that this would subside," he told a news conference after seeing Musharraf.

"I took the opportunity to welcome the recent assurances which had been articulated by the president himself," he said. "We would hope that these commitments are in fact implemented."

Musharraf said he looked forward to talks with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New York on Sept. 14 and that their last meeting had created an atmosphere conducive for progress.

US fails first major test after Sept 11 attacks

AFP, Washington

The United States appears to have failed the first major test of new security arrangements since the September 11 attacks as the superpower struggles to cope with the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina.

Unending images on television showing Americans dehydrated, hungry and unable to escape an uninhabitable New Orleans shocked the richest nation on earth as a desperate Third World nation in trouble.

Americans humbled by failures in Iraq saw that the authorities could not quickly cope with a natural disaster at home, The New York Times said Friday as thousands were feared dead in the costliest natural disaster in US history.

"The response you'd expect from an advanced country never happened," said Paul Krugman, a highly

reputed economist from Princeton University.

"After 9/11, hard questions were deferred in the name of national unity, then buried under a thick coat of whitewash. This time, we need accountability," he said.

Disaster planners were well aware that New Orleans could be flooded by the combined effects of a hurricane and broken levees, yet somehow the government was unable to immediately rise to the occasion.

Weathermen had also given ample warnings before Hurricane Katrina struck, in sharp contrast to the absence of any warning when terrorists turned hijacked airplanes into the most lethal acts ever carried out in the United States in 2001.

"If this is what happens when the nation has two days of advance warning, imagine the aftermath of a

surprise attack using a chemical, biological or nuclear device," said Paul Light of the non-partisan Brookings Institution.

Ironically, he said, a Category 5 hurricane was already on the Department of Homeland Security's list of 15 planning scenarios for emergency response.

The near helpless state of the authorities was evident in nearly every other department as Katrina wrought havoc in New Orleans, which bore the brunt of the hurricane in the US Gulf coast.

Up to 20,000 people who heeded warnings to evacuate to the Superdome stadium were made to spend days in sweltering squalor at the site of some of the most chaotic scenes.

Sharon-Abbas will hold summit this month

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas will meet this month, their first summit since Jewish settlers were evacuated from occupied Gaza, an Israeli newspaper said yesterday.

Haaretz said in its online edition that the leaders would meet at the end of the month after attending a September 14-16 summit at the United Nations. Israeli political sources confirmed talks were expected this month but had no details on the date or venue.

The Palestinians denied a summit had been set. But Abbas said in a published interview he would welcome new talks with Sharon that could help advance a US-led "road map" to peace.

"An official negotiating meeting should be held in Jerusalem, and we are ready for any meeting," Abbas told the Palestinian daily al-Quds.

Last month's withdrawals from the Gaza Strip and a corner of the West Bank, the first removal by Israel of settlements from land where Palestinians seek statehood, has stirred hopes of ending almost five years of fighting.



Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (L) shakes hands with Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh (R) in Tehran yesterday. Singh arrived in Tehran Friday night for talks with Ahmadinejad on proposed 7.4 billion dollar gas pipeline between Iran and India.