

Flushing out the ugly truth

JOAN WALSH

THE nightmare in New Orleans has a lot to tell us about poverty: the desperate poverty of the city's African-American population, of course, but also the poverty of political debate in the US today. The crisis unfolding before us -- dispossession, looting, people shooting at rescue workers, the president's dim response, and now, people dying in front of our eyes outside the Superdome -- rubs our noses in so much that's wrong in our country, it's excruciating to watch. But I'm especially struck by the inability of our existing political discourse to describe, let alone to solve, the intractable social problems that have come together in this flood whose proportions and portents seem almost biblical.

Ever since the first looting photos made cable news I've felt sick, like here we go again, we're going to have a new round in the culture war about the poor. Are they victims, or barbarians? If Sean Hannity's attacking them, well, I sure as hell have to defend them. When right-wing pundit Neal Boortz is saying shoot them on sight, somebody has to say that's sick and crazy, right? Personally, with all the destruction in view on Tuesday and Wednesday, I couldn't be horrified by people stealing food; I didn't even care much about people running off with sneakers and beer and TVs. Looting Wal-Mart? I don't defend it, but what do we expect? These are desperately poor people who've been deliberately left behind, in so many senses of the word -- left behind by society, shut up in housing projects and hideous poverty, and now truly left behind by local and federal officials who failed to come up with an evacuation plan for people too poor and isolated to leave on their own. If looting Wal-Mart was the worst of it, I thought, we should consider ourselves lucky.

But it wasn't. Thursday we saw people shooting at rescue

helicopters (with guns they stole from Wal-Mart, perhaps?), at hospital supply trucks, at workers trying to evacuate the sick from hospitals, the horrifying next chapter in an already awful story. I started to feel like my indifference to yesterday's looting was morally lazy, a reflexive shrug at having to really think about the poor, who they are, why they are. What a crazy, depraved way to treat people who are trying to help. But having said that, we're not absolved from trying to understand and reckon with the chaos. Like it or not, this crisis is going to be with us for a long time, because it's been coming for a long time -- we're going to have to face issues of race, poverty and civil rights we've long chosen to ignore.

As I watched buses make their way from the Superdome to the Astrodome in Houston, in a surreal and perverse echo of the Freedom Rides of the 60s, a few thoughts were inescapable. Why didn't we send a caravan of buses into the city's poorest neighbourhoods on Saturday or Sunday, when the dimensions of the disaster were already predictable? And what is really going to happen in Houston? These are dispossessed people who've been further dispossessed -- do we have a word for that? After a few days, the Superdome is already a slice of hell, with overflowing bathrooms, fights, rape allegations and now, people dying outside. Do we expect the Astrodome -- abandoned by the Houston Astros in 2000 for Enron Field, excuse me, Minute Maid Park -- to fare much better? Sure, Houston's got electricity and running water, but tens of thousands of scared, angry people packed into an abandoned sports stadium -- we couldn't come up with a better symbol of how little we care about the poor, how little we've thought about what to do with them, for them, if we tried.

As if to make sure we didn't miss the ironies, the same week as Katrina came news that the

Americans are ready to do the right thing. Americans want to help their neighbours -- even when those neighbours are people they don't know, who are poor and have different coloured skin. If you close your eyes, you can imagine a silver lining. Inspired by a president who got down in the water himself and started bailing, America could find the will and the resources to put people to work building a country, not destroying one the way we're doing in Iraq. But that is just a dream. In the real world, the water is likely to keep rising.



Downtown New Orleans.

poverty rate has climbed again, the fourth straight year under President Bush. But let's be fair: John Kerry barely mentioned the poor last year. And while President Clinton's booming 1990s lifted some boats, and his welfare reform at least muted the ideological sniping about

whether poor folks were victims or freeloaders, nobody's bothered lately to pay much attention to whether welfare reform made people's lives better, whether it paved a path out of poverty, or just moved its subjects into the vast ranks of the working poor. Then came Katrina, and we're

forced to pay attention. We're forced to look at New Orleans, to really see it -- one of the nation's great party cities and also one of its poorest. If you go for Mardi Gras or the annual Jazz Heritage Festival, really if you go any old time, you know its majority black population is mostly hid-

den from white tourists. Beyond the gorgeous French Quarter and Garden District it's long been a crime-plagued, gang-ridden, corruption-befouled city. But as long as you stuck to Fodor's, you didn't have to care. Now you do. Before Katrina, we were warned of coffins float-

ing out of cemeteries, but instead we got poor black people flushed out of slums, and to some people they're apparently just as scary. But they're not going back any time soon. They're our responsibility now. They always were; we just ignored it.

Maybe we can't anymore. On cable news, our normally buttoned-down blow-dried correspondents, almost all of them white, are cracking under the strain of bearing witness to the suffering and even death of the people who weren't looting, who did the right thing and headed to the Superdome, only to find a worse hell awaited them. They've dropped their script and they're asking tough questions. CNN's Chris Lawrence was clearly shaken describing what he saw: "We talked to mothers holding babies, some of these babies 3, 4, 5 months old, living in these horrible conditions. These people are being forced to live like animals. When you look at some of these mothers your heart just breaks. People need to see this, what it's really like here. We saw dead bodies. People are dying at the convention center, and there's no one to come get them."

Later, Anderson Cooper was even harsher, challenging Sen. Mary Landrieu for thanking President Bush for his efforts to aid her state. "Senator, I'm sorry for interrupting," he said. "For the last four days I've been seeing dead bodies in the streets here in Mississippi. You know, I gotta tell you, there are a lot of people here who are very upset, and very angry, and very frustrated. And when they hear politicians thanking one another, it kind of cuts them the wrong way right now. Because literally there was a body on the streets of this town yesterday being eaten by rats because this woman had been laying in the street for 48 hours and there's not enough facilities to take her up. Do you get the anger that is out here?"

Of course, it's unfair to blame

the president for an act of nature like Katrina. And yet it's irrefutable that this administration's backward policies and politics made this disaster worse than it had to be, and its belated response will do nothing to address the problems that have suddenly been flushed out into the open. The death toll from Katrina is likely to be higher than 9/11, but most of its victims will be black and poor, and I doubt we'll wage a war on poverty and neglect to match the war on terror launched after al-Qaida struck -- and if we did, I doubt it would be any more effective. The president, who continued his vacation while Katrina raged, just the way he kept reading "My Pet Goat" on 9/11, is headed for the Gulf on Friday. I'd like him to bring some answers, but I don't expect him to.

What I'd really like is to see him head today for the Superdome, bring his dad, and Bill Clinton, and John Kerry and Howard Dean -- any Democrat or Republican who cares, really -- and go to work, feeding and comforting the refugees and finding out what they need. Then I'd like to see them put people to work, rebuilding the amazing historic city we've apparently lost.

Americans are ready to do the right thing. Americans want to help their neighbours -- even when those neighbours are people they don't know, who are poor and have different coloured skin. If you close your eyes, you can imagine a silver lining. Inspired by a president who got down in the water himself and started bailing, America could find the will and the resources to put people to work building a country, not destroying one the way we're doing in Iraq. But that is just a dream. In the real world, the water is likely to keep rising. Still, I'd be thrilled to be proven wrong.

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Why Bush should apologise

VAN JONES

DON'T say that a hurricane destroyed New Orleans. Hurricanes do not drown cities.

It was a "perfect storm" of a different kind that put that great city underwater: Bush-era neglect of our national infrastructure, combined with runaway global warming and a deep contempt for poor African-Americans.

The result: catastrophe. The flooding was not due to heavy rains. It resulted from a weak levee -- one that was in mid-repair when the storm hit. For years, worried local officials had been begging for increased levee aid.

But Bush had other priorities. To fund his war effort, Bush in 2003 actually slashed funding for the Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Project, or SELA -- leaving millions of dollars of vital repair work undone. And this spring, he imposed drastic reduction in hurricane- and flood-control funding -- the steepest in New Orleans history.

In other words, the dollars that could have saved New Orleans were used to wage war in Iraq, instead. What's worse: funds for levees and modern pumping stations that might have spared the poor, were instead passed out to the rich, willy-nilly -- as tax breaks.

With those two simple steps, Bush squandered the hard-won Clinton-era surplus. And thus he left the national piggy bank empty for fixing and maintaining basic U.S. infrastructure.

Bush owes the people of New Orleans and the entire country an apology for under-funding our critical infrastructure.

Had the levee repairs been completed on time (two years ago), Katrina would have hit hard, destroyed buildings and probably taken some lives. But it is doubtful that it would have cracked open the floodwalls and submerged the entire city. It took Bush's criminal neglect of his domestic duties to produce that outcome.

But that is only one area of Bush's culpability. Ross Gelbspan says: "Katrina began as a relatively small hurricane that glanced off south Florida, [but] it was supercharged with extraordinary intensity by the relatively blistering sea surface temperatures in the Gulf of Mexico."

In other words, global warming likely super-charged this hurricane. Yet Bush's energy policies amount to an ongoing conspiracy to add even more carbon to the atmosphere, further destabilising the climate.

So get ready for even worse storms next year, and the next. And the next.

And the human suffering was not -- and will not be -- equally distributed. Poor people and black people

We must tell the truth about it. Some will say that this is no time for the "blame game" or "divisive politics." To the contrary: this is exactly the time to draw a line between those who fought to invest wisely in this country -- and those who happily squandered the national treasure on give-aways and imperial adventures. Progressives must not be hemmed in by some false "unity" with a President whose policies are largely to blame for this disaster.



Residents make their way by boat through the squalor.

didn't "choose to stay behind." They were left behind. All evacuation plans required the city's residents to have working, private cars -- plus gas money, nearby relatives or funds for a hotel stay. Without those things, tough luck.

Government agencies should have helped the destitute flee -- even those without cars or cash. But when the "face of suffering" is black, somehow our high standards for effective action and compassion begin to sag.

Seeing this, Bush could have taken a strong stand on the side of the poor and the suffering. But his half-hearted, emotionally-flat statement on Wednesday did little to rally the nation. It seems that, unless "the terrorists did it," Bush just can't get himself too worked up about Americans dying by the thousands.

So tonight, our sisters and brothers are perishing. And many in uniform who could help them are half-a-world away, in Iraq. Thus,

here we are. On top of five years of foolish policies that set New Orleans up for this disaster, we are now witnessing a monumental leadership failure in the Bush White House.

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To the contrary: this is exactly the time to draw a line between those who fought to invest wisely in this country -- and those who happily squandered the national treasure on give-aways and imperial adventures. Progressives must not be hemmed in by some false "unity" with a President whose policies are largely to blame for this disaster.

Right now, we must press the federal government to intensify efforts to rescue everyone. Then, we must demand an immediate repeal of the tax cuts -- to enable rebuilding in New Orleans and repair of the nation's crumbling

infrastructure. Lastly, let's insist that any Louisiana and Mississippi guardsmen who want to return home from Iraq to aid their communities be allowed to do so.

The truth is that the poor people of Louisiana and Mississippi were deliberately left behind -- and not just over the weekend. Our political leaders -- most especially George W. Bush -- left them behind a long time ago.

In the aftermath of this wholly avoidable catastrophe, let us do all we can to rescue those who have been abandoned. And then let us rescue the US government from those who engineered their abandonment.

At this point, we have a sacred duty to do both.

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ANM NURUL HAQUE

THE series of bomb explosions that rocked Dhaka and other parts of the country on August 17, leaving two people dead and more than 300 injured has become a matter of grave concern for the nation. The government for the first time admitted that Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) was responsible for the bomb blasts, and a total of 155 members of the JMB have so far been arrested from different parts of the country. Some blast suspects, who earlier confessed to their involvement in the August 17 blasts, also admitted that they were members of the banned JMB, as they were being quizzed at the Joint Interrogation Cell (JIC) in Dhaka. The Daily Star in its investigation report entitled "Inside the militant groups" published profiles of as many as seven Islamist outfits that are on a similar mission to import the Taliban-style Islamic revolution in Bangladesh.

According to the report, Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) was formed in 1998. The activists of this mainstream Islamist outfit believe in capturing state power through armed revolution and running the country by establishing Islamic rule. JMB has developed a strong network across the country and Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) was formed as its militant front to carry on armed operations. JMJB's agenda is the neutralisation of the left-wing extremists, particularly the cadres of the Purbo Banglar Communist Party (PBCP).

Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI) was formed reportedly with assistance from Osama bin Laden. It has around 15,000 members in Bangladesh, including local residents and foreigners who are mostly the students of various madrasas.

Shahadat-AL-Hiqma (SAH) was launched in 1997 but started its activities openly in 2001 under the banner of an NGO. Hizbut Towhid (HT), Hizb-ul-Tahir (HUT) and Islami Biplabi Parishad (IBP) are some other Islamist outfits on a similar mission to establish an Islamic state in Bangladesh through armed revolution.

Among so many questions that were raised after the serial bombing of August 17, the most vital one is regarding the source of finance of these Islamic outfits. Over fifteen hundred obtain funds from donors in developed countries. The intelligence agencies are now closely watching the

The government has recently decided to accede to the International Convention for Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism, realising its significance in the context of present global situation. According to the Foreign Ministry officials, accession to the convention has paved the way for the government to examine bank accounts and monitor fund transactions to detect terrorism financing.

activities of some Islamic NGOs, particularly their sources of funds and how they utilised the money prior to August 17.

According to the report published in The Daily Star on August 31, some 34 foreign funded major Islamic NGOs are registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau and 15 of them are getting over Tk 200 crore in donation every year from the donors. The amount obtained by each of these NGOs in a year, varying from Tk 5 crore to 70 crore, mainly come from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and United Arab Emirates (UAE). Some of these NGOs also get funds from the US and UK. These NGOs include Islamic Relief Organisation (IRO), Al Markajul Islami, Ishra Islamic Foundation, Ishraahul Muslimin, AL Forkan Foundation, AL Maghrib Eye Hospital, etc. There are several hundred local Islamic NGOs registered with the Social Welfare Department. These local NGOs also get foreign donation, but have no accountability to the government as they work as affiliates of the foreign funded ones.

Bangladesh Bank on September 1 asked the commercial banks of the country to send detailed information on the bank accounts of Maulana Fariduddin Masud, ex-director of Islamic Foundation and his organisation Isla-hul Muslemin Parishad, who was detained for his suspected link to the August 17 bombings. The intelligence agencies found three crore taka in three accounts of Maulana Masud who withdrew Tk 70 lakh in the month of June and suspected that the money was used for the bomb blasts of August 17.

Kuwait-based NGO Revival for Islamic Heritage Society and Saudi Arabia-based NGO AL Haramain Islamic Foundation are also suspected to have links to Islamic militants. These NGOs get donations from the Middle East countries for construction of mosques, hospitals, and orphanages, but spend the major portion of money to fulfill their hidden mission.

Qwami madrasas, with their number raised to over 10,000, also depend on money coming in from the Middle East countries. A large portion of the funds collected for

the Qwami madrasas is allegedly used for training of Islamic militants.

Foreign Donation Regulation Ordinance 1978 is the law for regulating foreign funds received by the NGOs. But due to some vacuum in the ordinance, some of the NGOs are misusing the foreign funds. To ensure fool-proof supervision and to bring the overall activities of the NGOs under their scrutiny, the NGO Affairs Bureau has prepared a draft amendment to bring some major changes in the existing ordinance, making greater room for the regulator to monitor and evaluate the operations of the NGOs. Earlier, a cabinet sub-committee also submitted an exhaustive report and a set of recommendations to the government for monitoring the activities of the NGOs and bringing them under a legal framework. But fate of the proposed amendment to the existing foreign donation regulation ordinance hangs in balance due to some procedural complexities coupled with the lack of initiative from the concerned authorities. But to check the flow of foreign funding to Islamic outfits, some new provisions must be incorporated in the existing ordinance in a bid to enhance the government's control over the NGOs' operations.

Money laundering is another means of financing Islamic militants in Bangladesh. A section of religion-based political leaders visit Middle East countries every year raising funds in the name of religious and charitable organisations and have recourse to money laundering for bringing the funds. In Bangladesh, the Money Laundering Prevention Act-2002 came into force on April 5, 2002 with the aim to prevent money laundering. But under the present critical situation, Bangladesh is not able to increase its own anti-money laundering capabilities effectively. Funds for the Islamist outfits and other illegal trade that are laundered through banks and financial institutions threaten the security of the country.

Both the area and volume of money laundering has substantially increased in Bangladesh in recent days and the scope for combating it has become complex

due to its global nature. Some exporters and importers of the country also help transferring foreign funds that are channelled through laundering and mainly come via Bangkok and Singapore. Saudi Arabia, under pressure from the United States since the September 11, 2001 attacks to clamp down on local support for militants, approved anti-money laundering laws as a part of their efforts to combat the financing of global terrorism. In fact regional-based long term programmes are needed to combat money laundering.

Bangladesh is likely to be able to strengthen monitoring of bank accounts and fund transactions to detect terrorism financing effectively from now on, as the country has since acceded to an international anti-terrorism convention. Except for the International Convention for Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism, Bangladesh had earlier acceded to 11 other anti-terrorism conventions, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on December 9, 1999. The country delayed to accede or ratify that particular convention for several years because of its reservations about some of the clauses in the convention. However, the government has recently decided to accede to the International Convention for Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism, realising its significance in the context of present global situation.

Apart from the UNO, some other countries had also been putting pressure on the Bangladesh government to ratify the convention, particularly after the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York city. According to the Foreign Ministry officials, accession to the convention has paved the way for the government to examine bank accounts and monitor fund transactions to detect terrorism financing. Besides, it will help prevent illegal money transfers through the banking channels. If necessary, Bangladesh will also be able to seek international cooperation in this regard.

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