

Editorial

Profiting from Natural Disasters

Reports coming out of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama indicate that there is much more than incompetence going on in the failure of the U.S. government to protect its citizens from the ravages of hurricane Katrina. In fact these reports are beginning to paint a picture of deliberate and systematic efforts by the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to block assistance from reaching the hurricane victims, especially in the city of New Orleans.

It appears that, from the beginning, anyone who did not have the financial resources to leave New Orleans ahead of the hurricane was treated like a criminal. Within a day, the city was surrounded by armed FEMA officers who cut emergency communication lines to the city and refused to allow any relief workers or supplies of food and water to

enter. By the second day, thousands of civilian volunteers, many with boats, had descended on New Orleans to assist in evacuating survivors. However, they were refused entry to the city and ordered to return home. Some reported that FEMA officials advised them that only contractors were being allowed to enter the city. Others reported that they witnessed hundreds of Louisiana Department of Fisheries and Wildlife officers standing around for days doing nothing because FEMA would not allow them into New Orleans and would not release them to go to other areas that needed assistance. There are similar reports of firefighters from across the United States arriving to help, only to be sent elsewhere for “orientation” sessions.

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The Politics of Humanitarian Aid

Following the destruction caused by hurricane Katrina, two countries currently being targeted by U.S. imperialism immediately came forward to pledge humanitarian aid for the hundreds of thousands of victims of Katrina in the southern United States.

In Cuba, the National Assembly observed a moment of silence to honour those who were killed by Katrina’s initial impact and aftermath and Cuban President Fidel Castro sent a message of condolence on behalf of the entire Cuban nation to all those affected. Cuba also communicated with the U.S. State Department offering medical assistance in the form of over 1,500 trained emergency medical personnel and desperately needed medicine. Asked to comment on the Bush government’s response to

the hurricane, Castro refused, instead reiterating a message of solidarity with the American people.

In Venezuela, the reaction was also quick. Describing the situation as a “catastrophe” for the people of the southern United States, President Hugo Chavez said his government would provide food, oil and monetary assistance as required, as well as two mobile hospital units, each capable of assisting 150 people, 120 specialists in rescue operations, 10 water purifying plants, 18 electrical generators of 850 KW each, and quantities of bottled water and canned food.

On September 1, CITGO Petroleum Corporation, owned by the Venezuelan state oil

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U.S. newspapers have also reported that truckloads of water sent by Wal-Mart were turned away and the U.S. Coast Guard was stopped by FEMA from bringing 1000 gallons of diesel fuel into New Orleans. The Red Cross also reported that FEMA would not let it deliver food to the starving victims, allegedly because of safety concerns for Red Cross personnel. They were told that no one would be allowed into the city until the National Guard arrived to secure it. Of course, the National Guard did not arrive until the fifth day of the disaster. A memo leaked from the Louisiana governor's office claims that U.S. president George W. Bush personally advised the governor that he would not release federal funds or authorize deployment of the National Guard until she signed a letter absolving the Bush administration of any blame in the disaster and transferring all authority in dealing with it to the federal government. She reportedly refused to do so.

Since FEMA was made part of the Department of Homeland Security it has lost hundreds of emergency administrators because of frustration that the organization had lost its focus on preparing for natural disasters and that "anti-terrorism" measures were receiving all of the attention and money. There is open talk that the Bush administration is preparing to privatize FEMA and needed a spectacular failure, such as the one in New Orleans, in order to prepare public opinion that the private sector could respond to disasters in a more efficient manner. It is estimated that \$2 billion per day is flowing into the hurricane affected areas in the southern U.S. and it is being suggested that at least part of the delay in federal assistance arriving was to give cronies of the Bush administration time to line up at the trough. As the situation in Iraq has clearly shown, response to disasters can be an extremely lucrative business. Many of the 14,000 troops now patrolling the streets of New Orleans are, in fact, private "security officers" (mercenaries) who have recently returned from similar duties in Iraq.

There is, of course, ample evidence that the private sector is extremely efficient in responding to natural disasters. Within a day of hurricane Katrina hitting the Gulf Coast, gasoline prices across North America jumped by 20 percent or more. This was justified by the "shortages" of crude oil and refined gasoline supposedly caused by damage to the oil rigs off the Louisiana coast and the shutting down of several big refineries in the New Orleans area. However, oil company officials did not explain how the shortages spread across the continent so rapidly. Nor have they explained why gasoline prices are still so high despite the fact that the oil rigs and refineries suffered little, if any, damage and were back in operation within 48 hours.

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company Petroleos de Venezuela, pledged \$1 million towards relief efforts. CITGO President and CEO Felix Rodriguez said "Our hearts go out to the victims of this terrible tragedy and CITGO stands prepared to offer its assistance." Shortly after announcing the aid, Rodriguez travelled to Lake Charles, Louisiana, meeting with local officials and visiting the City Centre, which was turned into a shelter for storm refugees. CITGO has a complex in Lake Charles, and its staff are currently all volunteering full-time to assist with relief efforts. Rodriguez also presented officials with a letter from Venezuela's Energy Minister, Rafael Ramirez, pledging additional assistance in the form of fuel supplies to offset shortages if required.

Local American officials welcomed offers of assistance from Cuba, Venezuela and anyone else willing to contribute. However, the U.S. State Department was less receptive, calling "unsolicited offers of assistance" counterproductive. Media reports have quoted State Department officials questioning the sincerity of the offers.

In response, President Castro gave an extensive media interview stressing the serious nature of Cuba's

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CN Rail Arrogance

On August 8, a CN Rail train derailed on the shores of Wabamun Lake in Alberta, spilling 733,000 litres of bunker C fuel oil and an unknown amount of pole-treating oil into the lake. Although CN acknowledges that it knew that the pole-treating oil contained carcinogens, it failed to advise the Alberta Environment Department for almost a week. CN also ignored the demands of local residents that it take immediate efforts to contain and clean up the spilled oil, concentrating instead on clearing and repairing the track so that trains could start running again as soon as possible. There are reports that ruptured cars were simply pushed off the tracks into the lake and no effort was made to clean up the spilled oil for over a week. In addition, Occupational Health and Safety officials are investigating whether CN knowingly put the cleanup workers at risk by not informing them of the health hazards associated with the spilled materials and not providing them with the appropriate safety equipment.

In the 1980s, CN Rail boasted one of the best safety records of any North American railway company. However, that record has been steadily deteriorating since large scale layoffs began in the

1990s after CN was privatized. Its safety record has further deteriorated over the past five years, with an average of 120 derailments per year. The Transportation Safety Board of Canada has stated that, at its present rate of increase, CN is expected to have 180 derailments in 2006. Union officials representing CN engineers and maintenance workers have charged that CN CEO Hunter Harrison has knowingly put Canadians at risk by cutting back on track and equipment maintenance in order to artificially increase dividend payments to CN shareholders.

The arrogance displayed by CN Rail towards its employees and towards the Canadian public is a direct consequence of the neo-liberal policies adopted by the Mulroney Conservatives and defended by the Chretien and Martin Liberals, as well as by every provincial government regardless of which party is in power. Those policies place the profit margins and competitiveness of large corporations ahead of the health and welfare of the Canadian people and hold corporations unaccountable to anyone but their shareholders.

Israel Moves to Consolidate Settlements in the West Bank

Israeli government officials confirmed August 25 that Israel has issued confiscation orders for the seizure of Palestinian-owned lands in the West Bank. The land, held by some families for generations, is located around the largest Jewish settlement in the West Bank, Maala Adumim. Its seizure will enable the settlers to travel directly to East Jerusalem, while sealing off the route to any Palestinians in the area.

This move is in addition to the continued expansion of Israel's separation wall, which is also cutting off the 2.4 million Palestinians living in the West Bank from East Jerusalem and from each other. Entire communities and families have been separated by the wall, the construction of which the International Court of Justice ruled last year was illegal.

Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei condemned the most recent confiscation, describing it as "dark and dangerous." "With these actions there will be no room for a viable Palestinian state and no hope for peace," he told reporters. Other Palestinian commentators have noted that the land confiscation was a calculated attempt on the part of the Sharon government to appease the right-wing settler movement after the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. The land seizure is intended to reassure the settlers that Israel withdrew from Gaza only to consolidate its occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

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offer. He said: “Cuba, a short distance away from Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, was in a position to offer assistance to the American people. At that moment, the billions of dollars the United States could receive from countries all over the world would not have saved a single life in New Orleans and other critical areas where people were in mortal danger. Cuba would be completely powerless to help the crew of a spaceship or a nuclear submarine in distress, but it could offer the victims of hurricane Katrina, facing imminent death, substantial and crucial assistance. And this is what it’s been doing since Tuesday, August 30, at 12:45 pm, when the winds and downpours had barely ceased.”

President Chavez sharply criticized the Bush administration for its handling of the crisis but reiterated Venezuela’s offers of assistance. Speaking on September 5 during his weekly radio program, he asked “How many children died there that could have been evacuated by land, by air, by water? Not one helicopter was moved before the hurricane came. Not one public use vehicle was moved. No bus, nor military truck. Nothing.” However, he said, the pressing need was for assistance for those whose lives had been destroyed. He compared hurricane Katrina to the tragedy that Venezuela suffered in December 1999, when torrential rains caused mudslides, killed an estimated 15,000 people, and made over 150,000 homeless. “It is the same face, drama, and pain, whether in English, Spanish, Chinese, or Guarao [an indigenous language], it is the same soul.”

Following the tsunami which hit parts of Asia last December, an international campaign to funnel “aid” to the countries affected began, with some of the world’s biggest powers promising billions and billions of dollars. Similar campaigns have been undertaken after other natural disasters – a few years before the tsunami, for example, it was the earthquake that devastated Bam, Iran – and the results have always been the same. Only a fraction of the money pledged materializes and very little of that makes its way to the people.

In the same way, dozens of countries in sub-Saharan Africa have been on the receiving end of different aid campaigns responding to the devastation caused by HIV and AIDS, with similar results. From the hundreds of billions of dollars pledged, it is almost impossible to find any tangible improvement in the lives of those who are supposedly being aided. That is because for imperialist countries, humanitarian aid is simply another means to dominate countries or regions of the world.

The U.S. is past master of this. Scratch the surface and much of this aid is often directly tied to specific sections of capital – food aid for tsunami victims from the U.S. was bought with public revenues from companies like Cargill and ConAgra and then strategically distributed to eliminate as much local agricultural production as possible. Drugs for those suffering from HIV and AIDS in Africa is bought from the giant pharmaceuticals and distributed only when governments promise to stop importing generic, cheaper versions of these life-saving drugs.

So perhaps it is not surprising that State Department officials, confronted with genuine offers of humanitarian aid, responded as they did.

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