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Evacuation of Gulf Coast Not Good Enough

ATLANTA, Sept. 2 -- As Gustav slams into the Gulf Coast, President George W. Bush, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Director Dave Paulison, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin are taking their bows for avoiding another horrific Katrina spectacle. The US Human Rights Network believes that the evacuation of nearly two million people to dryer land is only a preliminary step in ensuring its responsibilities.

When the lines of people without cars, dependent on FEMA's new evacuation system, stretched a mile and a half around the rail and bus terminal in downtown New Orleans, officials gave up entering evacuees' names into FEMA's new electronic tracking system. As a result, no one knows who boarded those evacuation buses and trains and where they went. The resulting separation of families and disregard for their rights is unfortunately too reminiscent of Katrina.

And once again, the needs of the people of New Orleans and the broader Gulf Coast region are ignored while, by its own admission, the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) is behind its 2011 schedule for completing 84% of its work on the levee system. While billions a day are squandered on war, the \$14.8 billion allocated to the ACE will still not guarantee protection. And, so, flooding from Gustav is expected to destroy what little housing has been available since Katrina.

In the wake of Gustav, state and federal authorities from Mayor Ray Nagin, to President Bush, ignored the human needs and rights of the people, they defined the crisis as one of law and order, which is a bitter reminder of what we all saw during Hurricane Katrina. Once again, precious resources that could be spent on repairing tens of thousands of destroyed low income homes, has been spent on mobilizing tens of thousands of troops to patrol the empty streets and deny the rights of people who may need to break curfew.

As stated in the "United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement," people forcibly displaced from their homes and communities due to natural disasters are, considered Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) with internationally recognized human rights. "It is imperative that the US Government recognize the rights of all people in all stages of internal displacement, this includes all aspects of their well-being during the evacuation process, and their right to return and rebuild their lives as they choose," said Ajamu Baraka, Executive Director of the US Human Rights Network.

The neglect and mismanagement by FEMA as well as state and local government agencies that characterized the immediate response to hurricanes Katrina and Rita has continued to the present, now

we add a new layer to the equation with the onset of Hurricane Gustav. "The most vulnerable people continue to be those in public housing, people without ID, the undocumented, people with mental illness and disabilities, and the hospitalized, so in considering how successful the evacuation has been, we have to look at how many rights were respected and how humane the process is," says Rosana Cruz, co-director of Safe Streets, Strong Communities in New Orleans. Essential social services on which residents depend have yet to be fully restored, for example public housing, elderly care services, homeless shelters and shelters for women and healthcare. Funds targeted for the reinstatement of social services continue to be diverted to casinos, ports and other private business interests.

We therefore need to ensure the safety, dignity and human rights of all Gustav evacuees -- most of whom have previously been displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Recognized under international human rights standards as internally displaced persons, the rights of those forced to evacuate from the Region, should not only be respected, but also acknowledged by all levels of government and private actors. As we witnessed during the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, racial/ethnic minorities, historically the region's most vulnerable residents, have been the most adversely affected by government neglect, mismanagement and public policy that privileges privatization of social services.

We therefore need to ensure the safety and human rights of all Gustav evacuees, most of who continue to be internally displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and be subjected to a myriad of post-storm human rights violations particularly in the areas of housing, healthcare and education. The US Government must ensure that everyone who evacuated regardless of their legal status and/or use of the government's evacuation procedures, has the right to return, equal access to relief aid, as well as the provision of services in the various languages spoken in the Gulf Coast, particularly Spanish, French and Vietnamese, as well as the assurance that aid and services are being distributed equally and absent intimidation. It must also allow the public including non-governmental organizations and the media access to all evacuation facilities to assure that the human rights of all the displaced are being respected and protected. As stated by Baraka, "This government must not be allowed to repeat the human rights violations it committed in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. Hurricane Gustav must not be allowed to aggravate ongoing suffering of the IDPs from the Gulf Coast. The US government must abide by the "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement" and other relevant human rights laws and we are appealing on everyone of good conscience to stand on principle and demand that these rights are acknowledged, affirmed and implemented immediately."

The US Human Rights Network is a membership-based organization of more than 250 U.S.-based organizations and over 1200 individuals working on the full spectrum of human rights issues. For more information, please visit our website: www.ushrnetwork.org

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