



For Immediate Release

October 8, 2008

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Human Rights Violations Recur in Response to Hurricane Gustav; US Human Rights Network to Document Failures

Beginning on August 30, more than 2 million Gulf Coast residents were evacuated from their homes as Hurricane Gustav barreled toward Louisiana and Texas. In the ensuing days, tens of thousands of those residents were subjected to violations of their basic human rights, including disparate and discriminatory treatment; inadequate provision of food, water and shelter; and failure to provide for a safe and timely return.

Three years after the Hurricane Katrina debacle revealed major, systemic problems with federal, state and local government disaster relief policies, the official response to Hurricane Gustav proved that many of these the problems have yet to be addressed. "Governments have had plenty of time to fix the system," says Ajamu Baraka, Executive Director of the US Human Rights Network. "It is unconscionable that Katrina's hard lessons still have not been learned."

Under international human rights agreements to which the U.S. has subscribed, government has an obligation to protect the rights of people displaced by natural disasters. But federal and state policies conspire to undermine those rights. Louisiana issued rules on providing support to evacuees on August 29, for example, that mandated unequal protection for poor residents who required evacuation assistance as opposed to those who were able to leave on their own. And the federal Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Act places the financial burden of disaster recovery and resettlement on the states without regard for their ability to cover the costs, which is especially problematic for less affluent Gulf Coast states. "These inequitable and discriminatory policies virtually guarantee that governments will fall short of their human rights obligations," Baraka says.

In an effort to spotlight disaster-related human rights violations and ultimately leverage changes in policy and behavior, the US Human Rights Network announces the launch of the Gulf Coast Human Rights Monitoring and Documentation Project. Among other objectives, the project will collect and analyze information on the human rights implications of the Gustav response, monitor ongoing developments in the wake of Gustav and any future natural disasters, and report human rights violations and other relevant findings.

The first phase of the project, developed in partnership with the Louisiana Justice Institute and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement – NOLA, New Orleans, will involve the training of an extensive volunteer network to interview those displaced by Gustav and compile the data. A comprehensive report is expected by summer, 2009.

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