

Why the Gulf Coast still matters: A Human Rights Perspective

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Forced displacement of populations as a result of natural or human made disasters represents one of the most challenging humanitarian and human rights crisis in the 21st century. The proliferation of natural disasters including earthquakes, tsunamis, floods and hurricanes has instigated the displacement of more than twenty million people around the world. Persons obligated to leave their places of habitual residences and communities as a consequence of human made or natural disasters are recognized as internally displaced persons (IDPs) under international human rights standards. "The Guiding Principles on Internal

national racial/ethnic minorities, many times a country's most vulnerable citizens, are the most adversely affected by this phenomenon.

While the vast majority of tsunamis, earthquakes and floods have predominately devastated countries in the Global South, the 2005 hurricanes (Katrina and Rita) that wrought havoc in the Gulf Coast region of the United States instigating the displacement of more than one million people, was an extraordinary illustration of how disasters respect no boundaries, national sovereignty or philosophical and imagined divide between North and South. Displaced persons indiscriminately scattered across fifty states without regard for family, social networks or personal choice exacerbated the prevailing psychological, physical and emotional trauma endured during the disaster. Widely acknowledged as one of the worst natural disasters in United States history, the region sustained billions of dollars worth of damage, destroyed critical infrastructure across the affected states, crippled the local and state economies and exacted grave humanitarian costs. While the world watched attentively and in horror as the U.S. government and its political subdivisions abandoned thousands of predominately black, poor, elderly, women and children, along with communities with limited English proficiency, the veil of invisibility that had concealed the



One bedroom Fema Trailer in Biloxi, Mississippi. Home of a family of six.

Displacement," was submitted to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in 1998 and adopted unanimously by the Commission and the General Assembly. This international human rights doctrine is the "comprehensive framework aimed at protecting people from displacement and guiding decision-makers during and after any displacement."

Natural disasters and the displacement that accompanies it, creates situations of generalized vulnerability especially for national racial/ethnic minorities, poor people, women, children, the elderly and other marginalized communities. The disruption of traditional cultural practices, psychological, emotional and physical trauma, dislocation from social networks, homes and communities, sources of income and heightened vulnerability to violence (by both the state and private actors) increases exponentially communities' exposure to human rights violations. While, those displaced by armed conflict garner substantially more international attention, resources and moral indignation, persons displaced by floods, hurricanes and development projects are similarly subjected to a myriad of human rights abuses perpetrated by state and non-state actors that also require an international response and scholarly consideration. Moreover,

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dismal human development indicators in the areas of infant mortality, education, and poverty that existed in the region long before the storm, was revealed. Moreover, it must also be noted, that what we are witnessing in the region is a clear and unmitigated illustration of multiple, mutually reinforcing forms of displacement, natural disaster and development induced, that in combination have served to disparately impact the region's racial minorities. Not only have the region's minorities bore a disparate cost of the pre-storm gentrification in New Orleans and massive displacement as a result of the storm, they are also burdened by the human costs associated with a post-storm reconstruction and recovery effort that privileges the private sector as opposed to the largely minority population that inhabited the region before the storm.

Today, tens of thousands of displaced Gulf Coast residents are still dispersed throughout the country and many of those that have returned are underemployed, homeless, unable to access adequate healthcare services- particularly mental health services, occupying toxic trailers or substandard housing, unable to access affordable and sustainable housing due to the drastic decline in rental properties available or are unable to pay the skyrocketing rent. We know that there is a direct correlation between the diminution in affordable housing and a concomitant increase in homelessness. Moreover, various levels of government have either obstructed the process needed to create the conditions which would allow “internally displaced persons to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence” in accordance with the “Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement” or erected enumerable bureaucratic measures that have similarly prevented a just recovery and reconstruction to be undertaken. In Mississippi, federal funds designed for low income residents struggling in a housing market devastated by



Stop Demolitions Housing Demonstration in New Orleans, Louisiana. December 2007

the storms are set to be diverted for a port project while thousands of people continue to occupy temporary housing. As working class New Orleanians struggle to acquire adequate and affordable housing in the aftermath of the storm, the government has initiated the demolition of thousands of habitable or slightly damaged public housing units. Furthermore, the criminalization of popular dissent and resistance has served as one of the central pillars of the post-Katrina reality. Dozens of social justice activists have been pepper sprayed, beaten, jailed, convicted and fined for participating in popular, non-violent direct actions and in the broader democratic process. Today, one in twenty five New Orleans residents are homeless, rivaling major urban centers like New York, Atlanta and Washington D.C. More broadly speaking, the privatization of public services and space (housing, education, security), decline in social services and the associated decrease in government accountability, promotion of corporate interests over the public good and the challenge posed to participatory democracy that is underway in the region presents profound human rights implications beyond the Gulf Coast region and should be challenged by social justice and human rights activists everywhere. No

longer are private security firms like Blackwater confined to operating with near impunity in Iraq or other obscure Global South hotspots, the hurricane and the disaster and destruction of property that manifested in its aftermath in New Orleans provided the justification for the appearance of private security forces on the streets of the Crescent City.

The neo-liberal economic agenda that privileges privatization of the public sector, propagated by the United States government and international financial institutions, has wrought havoc throughout the Global South and is being strategically implemented at home. And New Orleans is the testing ground.

While, the massive displacement of hundreds of thousands of urban working class, predominately black people as result of a catastrophic natural disaster and state neglect in New Orleans is unique, development induced displacement of populations of similar racial/ethnic and socioeconomic demographics has been taking place for years in major urban cities across the country (and the world, for that matter). Development induced displacement scholar at the World Bank Michael Cernea extrapolates “Like becoming a refugee, being forcibly ousted from one’s land and habitat...is not only immediately disruptive and painful, it is also fraught with serious long-term risks of becoming poorer than before displacement, more vulnerable economically, and disintegrated socially.” Land expropriation, forced population relocation of principally ethnic/racial minorities and natural resource extraction are a few of the consequences of development induced displacement or what is more commonly referred to in the United States as “gentrification.” Social justice and human rights activists would more properly situate this phenomenon, as it has manifested itself throughout urban spaces throughout the United States, as an illustration of “ethnic cleansing.” I would argue that populations forcibly relocated due to urban infrastructure projects or poverty de-concentration formulas that have littered the landscape of U.S. public policy constitutes a “Global North” form of development induced displacement. Just as the phenomenon of development induced displacement disparately impacts “the poorest and most vulnerable sections of populations,” urban displacement as manifested in the United States, disparately and profoundly affects low-income racial minorities. From communities of color in New York, Washington D.C., Atlanta, Chicago, San Francisco and New Orleans, we have witnessed a massive forced migration of urban, working class, predominately black populations whose communities have been purposefully and strategically neglected, then driven from these economically valuable urban spaces by state and private actors like developers where capital has been reinvested in order to make way for the maximization of profit and exploitation of urban space and public resources. This phenomenon has profound human rights implications. In Chicago, for example, “Public housing is being eradicated, project-based Section 8 contracts in buildings that house thousands of people are set to expire, homelessness is on the rise, and condominium conversions have saturated the market, and private low income and affordable housing options have virtually disappeared.” The demographic transformation of valuable urban space, the dislocation of low-income minority populations, the harrowing struggle to battle private developers and various levels of government for equitable access to public space, represents one of the most challenging issues confronting working class communities of color today. We have moved from an era and government which sought to engage in a “War against Poverty” to one that is committed to waging a “War on the Impoverished.” This struggle is taking place in cities across the country and New Orleans is “ground zero.” What happens in New Orleans,

the rapid privatization of public goods and services, the emergence of privatized security forces, the monopolization of valuable urban space and the dislocation of working class, communities of color, is an indication of what could manifest itself, in an accelerated fashion, in a major urban city near you. The Gulf Coast still matters!

The human rights of the displaced and returnee population in New Orleans and the broader Gulf Coast region continues to cause considerable outrage and protest by social justice and human rights activists at home and abroad. Three years after the storm, human rights principles reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and other relevant international human rights instruments including various articles in the Convention for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, have been summarily violated by the United States government, its political subdivisions and private actors. In its review of U.S. compliance with the International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the United Nations Committee on the Elimination on Racial Discrimination, recently cited ongoing problems in the Gulf Coast as a major concern, noting “the disparate impact that this natural disaster continues to have on low-income African American residents, many of whom continue to be displaced more than two years after the hurricane.” The right to housing and health, as articulated in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are just two of the most egregious violations that continue to prevail in the region, three years later:

RIGHT TO HOUSING

- Instead of providing survivors with long term, sustainable and affordable housing solutions, the federal government provided thousands of survivors with formaldehyde laden trailers which have caused wide-ranging health problems while failing to address the acute housing crisis in the region;
- In the midst of an acute housing crisis, the government is in the process of destroying thousands of public housing units, that were in good condition in New Orleans after the storm, leaving enumerable economically vulnerable residents without access to safe, quality and affordable housing;
- The homeless population in New Orleans has doubled since the storm and according to UNITY of Greater New Orleans;
- According to PolicyLink, eighty percent of those who occupied affordable housing units before the storm do not have access to affordable housing two years after the storm.

RIGHT TO HEALTH

- Charity Hospital in New Orleans, a public institution which was the principal vehicle for medical care and delivery for the poor, predominately African American population remains closed. This situation has left the population destitute with acute health care needs that are not being adequately met;
- According to the Kaiser Foundation, three years after the storm, nearly 90% of New Orleanians surveyed admitted to confronting challenges in the areas of physical or mental health, healthcare



Housing is a Human Right Demonstration in Biloxi, Mississippi. First Year Commemoration of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

coverage and access or employment.

In response to the devastation and displacement caused by Hurricane Katrina and the inept and incompetent government response before, during and after the storm, the US Human Rights Network has engaged in a broad based domestic and international human rights advocacy and popular education campaign devoted to holding the US government accountable to its international human rights obligations.

Three years later, we continue to demand that United States government:

- o Recognize Katrina survivors as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)
- o Provide compensatory relief to hurricane victims;
- o Bring FEMA and all federal agency policies in line with the provisions of the “U.N. Guiding Principles on Internal displacement” and the broader, applicable human rights instruments;
- o Create the conditions for the realization of human rights for all survivors irrespective of race, gender, national origin, class or immigration status

We will continue to mobilize, organize, agitate and educate domestic and international stakeholders about the human rights issues that continue to prevail in the Gulf Coast region and seek redress through all available channels.

For more information about the US Human Rights Network’s “Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Human Rights Campaign” visit: www.ushrnetwork.org or call 404-588-9761