

Colombia Report Editorial

What New Orleans revealed

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Choose the phrasing. A catastrophe waiting to happen, the chronicle of a disaster foretold. Any metaphor will do.

- ✓ The flooding was preventable: based on computer models and using detailed graphic art, scientists (University of New Orleans, Louisiana State University, Tulane University, University of Colorado, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) had predicted with incredible precision the tragic events of 2005.
- ✓ The Houston Chronicle in a December, 2001, article warned that a storm would strand 250,000 people or more, and predicted deaths up to 25,000 as a result.
- ✓ The New York Times warned on an April 30, 2002, article of the high potential for a catastrophic levee-break and flood in New Orleans.
- ✓ The New Orleans newspaper the *Times-Picayune*, warned in 2002 that about 100,000 people without transportation would especially be threatened in the event of a hurricane
- ✓ On October 24, 2004, a year before Katrina, the National Geographic magazine described a scenario of a hurricane hitting New Orleans, destroying the levees, and flooding the city. The story estimated that 200,000 people would not be able to evacuate the city in time. The estimate of casualties was 50,000.
- ✓ In November, 2004, a study published by the University of Colorado Natural Hazards Center predicted that damage from a Category 4 hurricane would produce storm surges that would cause flooding and the breakdown of the levee system that protected New Orleans. Other studies showed that even a Category 3 hurricane, if it hit the city directly, would swamp the city under 30 feet of water, destroy the old 19th century levees, and fatally trap thousands of people.

- ✓ An AP report on August 27, about 36 hours before the hurricane hit, stated that "at least 100,000 people in the city lack the transportation to get out of town."

In the face of this information, the "evacuation" measures taken amounted to "get out if you can." The free market came into play: if you had the means, a big "If", you had to figure out how to get out of the way.

But, as the National Geographic scenario foreshadowed, the New Orleans crisis revealed that getting out was not an option for "the car-less, the homeless, the aged and the infirm." With no vehicle, no cash, and nowhere to go, the free-market evacuation order did not bode well for tens of thousands of New Orleans residents.

The catastrophe revealed to the world that nearly one-third of New Orleans population was officially below the poverty line, people working at poverty wages, and struggling against high rents and regressive taxation. In that New Orleans simply mirrors conditions across urban centers throughout the United States which is basically two countries, one wealthy, publicized around the world by the U.S. movie and television industries; the other one, millions of people on the edge of economic misery.

The poor in New Orleans were also primarily black. What happened after the evacuation order was given revealed to the world what can happen to you in the United States if you are black and poor. No words are necessary to describe the deaths, hunger, thirst, squalor and desperation endured by vast numbers of people in the city as they waited in vain and viewed around the world in television screens.

Why wasn't the catastrophe avoided? Because plans to fortify the system of levees were not funded year after year. Because the budget Army Corps of Engineers, responsible for the upkeep of the system has been repeatedly slashed, by a record 44% (71.2 million dollars) in 2005 alone. Because FEMA, the federal agency in charge of disasters has been under-funded and many of its previous functions privatized. Because measures necessary to prevent the flooding are incompatible with an economic model that does not prioritize public investment in infrastructure. Because there were no plans for a safe and swift evacuation of the city. Because moneys that could be used for disaster prevention and relief have been siphoned off to pay for the

war in Iraq. Because for the last twenty-five years the government of the United States has been progressively destroying and dismantling the various forms of social protection, environment protection and social welfare instituted after the crisis of the 1930s and for subsequent decades.

Cutting the size of government and privatizing or eliminating its protective and regulatory functions became the mantra of the Washington power elite. Disregard for the public interest role of government became even more manifest under the current administration: Two years ago President Bush appointed a political crony to head FEMA. The only administrative experience this man had was as the director of a board of judges of Arabian horse show competitions. A columnist for the New York Times called the Director of FEMA a "blithering idiot" this past week.

Neoliberal cost cutting and short-term management has rendered uninhabitable and possibly destroyed one of most important historical landmarks in the United States and one of its most important commercial ports, the city of New Orleans. The free market dogma is not only ruining the national economies of the Third World, it is also creating the conditions for other 'Katrinas' in the U.S.

The human tragedy of Katrina is the result of these neoliberal economic principles in the government, not the hurricane. These same neoliberal principles are presented by the United States to other nations of the world, such as Colombia, as the panacea to remedy its economic problems. The New Orleans tragedy reveals that the neoliberal bromides can be a recipe for disaster.