

# Repairing New Orleans' levees vexing problem

By K. Chandler

Special to Sentinel-Voice

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which plunged 80 percent of New Orleans under water, killing at least 1,000, there was a great deal of speculation by the Army Corps of Engineers who designed and constructed the city's floodwalls that Hurricane Katrina, a Category 4 storm, was just too powerful for the levee system to withstand.

That theoretical premise was subsequently dismissed by several independent engineering and research teams, including Ivor van Heerden, deputy director of the Louisiana State University Hurricane Center, and a member of the levee investigative group, Team Louisiana, who noted that while the Industrial Canal floodwalls did overflow, two other canals, the 17th Street Canal and the London Avenue Canal, may have had their floodwalls breached due to design flaws or construction errors, a possibility that the Army Corps is reticent to buy into pending the results from their own investigation.

Also investigating the levee failures are The Ameri-

can Society of Civil Engineers, Team Louisiana, the National Science Foundation, The National Research Council, U.S. Senate and House committees, the Louisiana Attorney General's Office, and the FBI.

It is widely held that the sinking Louisiana coastline may have contributed to levee failures. By all accounts, Louisiana's coastline has been shrinking half an inch each year. In East New Orleans, which experienced the worst devastation, it is sinking even faster.

Exacerbating that precarious situation were floodwalls, designed to be flexible rather than immovable structures and consisting of narrow, elongated, inter-joined sections of corrugated steel sheet piling, topped by concrete and deeply embedded in mud. It is believed that rising water in the city's canals, coupled with the storm surge, would have applied a tremendous amount of pressure on the levees from both sides.

However, according to van Heerden, the levee walls were supposed to be able to "withstand 2.5 times" the amount of force that a hurricane the magnitude of

Katrina could put on them, raising the inevitable question, why — if the walls were not swamped from the storm surge, and if the corps had built in a substantial safety component — did they fail?

Recently, using ground sonar, van Heerden and Team Louisiana said that the sheet piling used by the Army Corps to hold up the floodwalls was only 10 feet deep, falling far short of the canal's 18.5-foot depth.

That claim was vigorously refuted by the corps which adamantly maintained — and corroborating government evidence backs them up — that it had accurately installed the sheet piling to the depth of 17.5 feet.

According to a Nov. 30 article in *The Times-Picayune*, 17th Street canal levee was doomed, report blames corps: soil could never hold. "The floodwall on the 17th Street Canal levee was destined to fail long before it reached its maximum design load of 14 feet of water because the Army Corps of Engineers underestimated the weak soil layers 10 to 25 feet below the levee, the state's forensic levee investigation team concluded..."



The ravaged Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood as seen from the Claiborne Ave. Bridge spanning the Industrial Canal and levees breached by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

The news article reiterates Team Louisiana's assertion that the corps' stated depth range would not have changed the outcome in New Orleans, and that even at depths of 17 feet it still would have resulted in the floodwall being breached.

"Using the data we have available from the corps, we did our own calculations on how much water that design could take in these soils before failure," stated van

Heerden. "Our research shows it would fail at water levels between 11 feet and 12 feet — which is just what happened" in Katrina.

"This is the largest civil engineering disaster in the history of the United States. Nothing has come close to the \$300 billion in damages and half-million people out of their homes and the lives lost," said Robert Bea, a University of California, Berkeley, professor who spearheaded the National Science Foundation's probe into the levee failures. "Nothing this big has ever happened before in civil engineering," he added, noting that it was incomprehensible since the

project being undertaken by the Army Corps of Engineering was so "straightforward."

While the debate rages on over the levee failures, new information has surfaced that raises questions as to who, if anyone, was keeping watch over the levees. According to documents recently produced by CBS News, "no one with any professional experience" was monitoring the levees. There were "no formal records found of levee inspections or maintenance and performance." In fact, the only qualification you had to have was to be a "resident of Louisiana."

K. Chandler writes for the *Westside Gazette*.

## Patriot

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"I think we'll be encouraging insensitivity to the individual freedom of Americans and also a troubling expansion of the executive power of the presidency," said Meredith Curtis, spokesperson for the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland.

The fear of unchecked presidential power became even more significant when a recent [The *New York Times*] report revealed that after the Sept. 11 attacks, Bush secretly authorized the National Security Agency to "eavesdrop" on Americans without the court approval needed to authorize domestic spying.

In a Dec. 19 address, Bush said he only authorized the monitoring of international calls, and that not only was his decision legal under the Constitution, but it was also necessary to fight the war on terrorism effectively.

"We know that a two-minute phone conversation between somebody linked to al Qaeda here and an opera-

tive overseas could lead directly to the loss of thousands of lives. To save American lives, we must be able to act fast and to detect these conversations so we can prevent new attacks," he said.

Curtis said while the ACLU understands the need to grant the White House additional powers to act during times of war, the nature and

length of the war on terrorism is such that measures like the Patriot Act and others need to be fully evaluated.

"I think that can be the case when you're talking about a limited time period, but we're now four years into the war on terror, which seems to have no end in sight. I think Americans should be having a national discussion

about national security and what tradeoffs we're willing to make," Curtis said.

"I don't think that the president making decisions in secret, except for, perhaps, having conversations with a few legislators, is appropriate for making policy," she added.

Zenitha Prince writes for *Afro Newspapers*.

## Katrina

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Dallas complexes, both owned by Atlanta-based Gables Residential, include allegations that agents mentioned specific income requirement for Black callers but not for Whites.

Gables spokesman David Margulies said the company was caught off-guard by the report, adding that Gables has provided housing for more than 470 hurricane victims and donated \$50,000 in hurricane-earmarked aid to the Red Cross. "We are surprised and dismayed by these allegations," Margulies said. "That is not how we do we business."

St. Louis-based Michelson Realty, owners of the other Dallas complex, did not immediately return messages left at their offices.

Landlords who are found guilty of discriminating against applicants can face fines up to \$11,000 per complaint, said Bryan Greene, HUD's director of policy for the of-

fice of fair housing.

Greene said HUD has received about 60 complaints from hurricane-displaced apartment seekers since Katrina forced tens of thousands to evacuate in August. He said some cases have been resolved, adding that HUD tries to settle issues before getting courts involved.

The NFHA's test included 65 sets of calls to apartment complexes in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee and Texas. Smith said each complex was called three times within a short period, twice by White callers and once by a Black caller.

Smith said more complaints could be filed but said the group will wait for HUD to investigate before taking any further action.

The Washington, D.C.-based alliance is a consortium of 120 private, nonprofit fair housing organizations and civil rights groups from 37 states.

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