

# Katrina

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residents return.

Some former resident have relocated to other cities and have no plan to return. But others are still in limbo and, at a minimum, want to decide who will lead the city the next four years. But that won't be easy.

As State Sen. Cleo Fields of Baton Rouge said in a letter to the Justice Department, "300 of the city's 442 — primarily in Black neighborhoods — voting precincts are unavailable for voting because of damaged sustained in and after Hurricane Katrina."

In his letter to John K. Tanner, chief of the Voting Rights Section of the Civil Rights Division, Fields continued, "As a result of the changes in precinct location and, arguably, deliberate lack of information... the State has caused voter confusion which will clearly lead to voter dilution."

Jesse Jackson, NAACP President Bruce Gordon and other civil rights leaders held a march in New Orleans recently seeking to have what they call an "illegal" election postponed so that more former residents can cast ballots.

The civil rights groups received a setback when a federal judge refused to postpone the April 22 election.

National Urban League President Marc Morial, a former two-term mayor of New Orleans, said, "This is a Florida in the making," referring to widespread voting problems in the 2000 elections. "If you see an election train wreck coming, why not do something to prevent it before the wreck occurs?"

Those living elsewhere must either return to New Orleans to vote or fill out absentee ballots.

And that has angered some displaced residents who witnessed Iraqi citizens living in the U.S. cast votes across the nation at satellite polling stations for an election being held in Iraq. Yet, U.S. citizens are not being accorded that same courtesy.

That's not the only indignity that afflicts them.

Because Mississippi has a Republican governor who once served as chairman of the National Republican Party and New Orleans' mayor is a Democrat as is the state's governor, Rep. William Jefferson said the Bush administration is playing politics by directing a disproportionate amount of federal recovery funds to Mississippi



Marchers cross the Mississippi River bridge during a protest rally in New Orleans on Saturday. Civil rights leader Jesse Jackson (front, third from left) participated in the event.

instead of Louisiana, where most of the damage occurred. Jefferson keeps a 2-page sheet in his Washington office comparing the damage in Louisiana and Mississippi and the federal response.

According to his calculations, there have been 1,075 confirmed deaths in Louisiana and 231 in Mississippi; 786,372 citizens from Louisiana have been displaced, compared to 110,160 from the Magnolia state; Louisiana has lost 18,752 businesses, Mississippi, 1,912; about 10 miles of Mississippi was damaged compared to 80 percent of Orleans Parish and all of St. Bernard Parish.

Although Louisiana suffered 85 percent of the hurricane damage, so far it has received only 54 percent of federal community block grant funds. By contrast, Mississippi, with 15 percent of the damage, has received 46 percent of the block grant funds.

When asked if Mississippi is being favored because of politics, Jefferson replied, "I'm sure that has something to do with it. It should be irrelevant. Both Senators [in Mississippi] are Republicans and the governor is a Republican. On our side of it, the governor is a Democrat and our Senators are split between the two parties. So that probably has something to do with what's happening here. The chairman of the appropriations committee is also a Mississippian, Thad Cochran, on the Senate side.

"But I would think that if all these folks who are suffering in Louisiana were not predominantly poor and predominantly Black, they'd get more attention. I don't think they would be ignored and

left out there the way they're being left out."

Even now, six months after the hurricanes, it is clear that New Orleans is still in need of help.

"It really does look like a ghost town still. You see people like every five blocks or so. They even found a body on Sunday... There are piles of debris in front of the houses. You see cars on top of cars. You see houses that are so weak that they're sinking in the middle," said Shari Logan, a Howard University student who spent her spring break helping residents clean up in New Orleans.

"At some corners, you know that a house had to have been there, but, you don't see any trace of this house. You just see stuff like pots and pans. And I saw, like, a computer. So you know that someone lived there, but you don't see any trace of the house... You see stairs, like going up to the houses. But the stairs are leading nowhere because there's nothing to step into. It's just still devastation."

Some of the devastation continues because of continued bureaucratic bungling by FEMA, the primary federal relief agency.

It was disclosed earlier this month that 10,777 mobile homes ordered to assist victims of Hurricane Katrina were parked, unoccupied, in Hope, Ark. It cost \$300 million to \$430 million to build the homes, but FEMA said they were not sent to the Gulf region because its regulations do not permit the mobile homes to be used in a flood plain.

Rep. Mike Ross (D-Ark.) said that's a consideration that should have been ad-

dressed before the units were built and called it "a symbol of what's wrong with this administration and what's wrong with FEMA."

The American Red Cross, the charity of choice for most Americans, has also come under fire recently. It fired two supervisors of the Gulf coast operation last week and is investigating allegations that supervisors in charge of kitchens in the disaster zone have been ordering more food than is needed. Interim Red Cross President John F. McGuire had earlier acknowledged that the agency is looking into possible criminal activity connected with the Red Cross kitchens and shelters.

The slow progress and uncertainty over the city's future — especially whether the rebuilt levees can withstand another strong hurricane — is causing die-hard New Orleans to hesitate about going back.

Terry Jones, publisher of New Orleans' *Data News Weekly*, was in Atlanta when Hurricane Katrina struck. He

has resumed printing his paper, changed the name to the *Louisiana Data News Weekly* and plans to continue to have his business operations there, though he is unsure if he will again take up residence.

"It's never going to be the same. So, it's not what you'll go back to," Jones said. "When you say 'go back home,' it's all relative, you know what I mean? Does it mean I'm going to sit down and eat crawfish? Am I going to pass through? Or what does that mean?"

Jones goes back and forth on whether he should return to his hometown. His mother and younger sister are looking to move back in May — just before the June 1 hurricane season begins — and that might influence his decision.

"One thing for sure," Jones said. "I'm not going back until after the hurricane season."

And what about those who return either before or after the hurricane season?

Families with children will have to think long and hard. Before Katrina, there were 118 public schools with 60,000 pupils. Today, only 20 schools have reopened, educating only 9,500 students.

Parents of some relocated students are also reporting problems.

"He's having a really hard time adjusting to school and just letting go of everything back home," Aneatha Baker said, referring to her son, Gantry, 13, now attending school in Jonesville, La.

She said teachers have reported that he appears agitated and is argumentative, traits he did not express in New Orleans. She said, "I guess somewhere in his mind, he figures we should be going back."

Some are undecided about whether to go back because Mayor Nagin's Bring Back

New Orleans Commission has not been clear on what neighborhoods would be allowed to be rebuilt

Although the city continues to issue building permits for all sections of the city, each neighborhood is being required to prove that it deserves city service by showing that at least 50 percent of the residents plan to return.

Trying to lure tourists back to New Orleans is a critical goal if New Orleans is to be resurrected, city officials say. The mega-million dollar tourism industry in New Orleans, home of the Mardi Gras, has attracted more than 10 million visitors from all over the world for decade after decade, creating more than 80,000 jobs and representing more than 30 percent of the city's operating budget, according to the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau. Though nowhere near its former levels, some national organizations, such as the American Library Association, the National Black Chamber of Commerce and the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education have scheduled conventions there this spring or summer.

Gross, who finds herself crying more often than not, recalls a Delta Sigma Theta sorority meeting she attended.

"For all of us, everybody was like, 'Oh, I'm dying inside.' And I said, 'Me, too.' But everybody was smiling like we're doing all right. But we were doing that for each other," she stated. "We don't have any control over our lives. We don't know what they're going to do two months from now."

This project is a cooperative effort between the National Newspaper Publishers Association and the Baltimore Afro.



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