

# Detroit, Deprived of Life Sustaining Water: UN Investigates Human Rights Violations

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*Usually crimes against humanity take place behind closed doors, in concentration camps, Abu Ghraib-like torture settings or Nazi Germany; not so in 83% Black Detroit, Michigan. In the next few weeks, the international community will witness with eyes wide open the city of Detroit's blatant violations of human rights. These crimes will be condoned and executed by Detroit officials with the full knowledge of the White House.*

Access to water is considered a human right and access to safe and clean water is a core mission of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), however, 40% of the residents of Detroit will be deprived of the basic element of life: water. Children will go to school without baths and senior citizens will be deprived of water to take medicine. Having lost confidence in a US national commitment to saving the lives of citizens, advocacy groups have begun to petition the United Nations for an emergency response.

The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), has begun shutting off water to 3,000 people a week, and could soon cut off access to drinkable water for 150,000 Detroit residents who have failed to pay recent water bills.

Detroit was one of the cities hardest hit by international trade agreements, such as NAFTA. Detroit is also a city targeted for ethnic cleaning of its African population to make space for white professionals. Once a thriving middle-class city, the union movement was crushed by the government and business executives determined to drive wages down. At the end of the day, these latest tactics are designed to induce forced relocations, a component of ethnic cleansing that is sometimes politely and inaccurately called gentrification.

The forced relocation tactics have changed over the years, with contemporary methods eerily resembling Nazi-like strategies, such as deliberately poisoning urban and domestic water supplies, depriving children and households of life-maintaining and sustaining water and a decent education. Black communities - already traumatized by the removal and imprisonment of nearly one million African men and the murder by police of thousands of unarmed young men and women - have become soft targets for these unrelenting attacks.

The [United Nations'](#) Human Rights council criticized the United States for police violence and racial discrimination, the Guantánamo Bay Detention Facility and the continued use of the death penalty. Member countries criticized the US and recommended that it strengthen legislation and expand training to "eliminate racism and excessive use of force by law enforcement."

"I'm not surprised that the world's eyes are focused on police issues in the U.S.," said Alba

Morales, who investigates the U.S. criminal justice system at Human Rights Watch. “There is an international spotlight that’s been shone [on the issues], in large part due to the events in Ferguson and the disproportionate police response to even peaceful protesters,” she said.

The recommendations from the Council seem tepid and dismissive of the scale of the violence towards African-Americans. These same atrocities occurring in any other country outside the US, such as Bosnia or Syria would cause an international uproar and calls to prevent deaths from water deprivation and to provide international protections for the targeted group. But, the US is the major donor to the UN and plays a leadership role on the UN Security Council, making it virtually impossible for nations that would show solidarity to African-Americans to act through this institution. Nevertheless, UN member states do have a bully-pulpit to expose the human rights violations occurring in the US.

However, when one considers the war-like tactics deployed against an unarmed civilian population, such as, deliberate state-sponsored poisonings, murders of unarmed civilians, forced relocations and imprisonment, one is left asking what part of genocide does the UN not understand?

And the beat of genocide escalates.

The Detroit People’s Water Board, Food and Water Watch, Blue Planet Project, and Michigan Welfare Rights Organization submitted [a comprehensive report](#) to the U.N.’s special rapporteur that details the dire situation facing the predominately Black population of Detroit:

“Sick people have been left without running water and working toilets. People recovering from surgery cannot wash and change bandages. Children cannot bathe, and parents cannot cook...”

“(F)amilies concerned about children being taken away by authorities due to lack of water and sanitation services in the home have been sending their children to live with relatives and friends, which has an impact on school attendance and related activities.”

Activists claim the city has been unfairly overcharging Detroit residents for water to compensate for its significant financial woes. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 38.1 percent of Detroit residents are living below the poverty line. Despite the tough times many people are facing, they’ve been paying an average of \$64.99 a month, significantly higher than the national [average of about \\$40](#), and rates are only going up. The Detroit City Council [just approved a nearly 9 percent rate increase for water](#).

Three U.N. human rights experts [issued a statement](#) declaring that “disconnection of water services because of failure to pay due to lack of means constitutes a violation of the human right to water and other international human rights.

“When I conducted an official country mission to the U.S. in 2011, I encouraged the U.S. government to adopt a federal minimum standard on affordability for water and sanitation and a standard to provide protection against disconnections for vulnerable groups and people living in poverty,”

said Catarina de Albuquerque, who is the U.N.'s special rapporteur on the right to safe drinking water and sanitation. "I also urged the government to ensure due process guarantees in relation to water disconnection."

One of the experts, Leilani Farha, who focuses on the right to adequate housing, also pointed out the racial implications of shutting off water to the [nearly 83 percent black](#) population. "If these water disconnections disproportionately affect African Americans, they may be discriminatory, in violation of treaties the U.S. has ratified," said Farha.

These calls for justice are falling on deaf ears. While [President Obama](#) concedes that the poisoning in Flint "was a man-made disaster; this was avoidable, this was preventable," the President did not deploy with all due haste the full power of the federal government to solve this situation. In fact, he primed the Flint community, in which over 8,000 children are suspected of being lead poisoned to expect that it may take additional two years before lead pipes are replaced. But, he left Flint on a positive note, asserting that "[filtered water](#) in the city was safe for anyone over the age of six."

But not everyone is feeling the pain of water deprivation in Detroit. That kind of pain seems to be reserved for families and communities. [The Detroit Water](#) and Sewerage Department has decided not to pull the plug on businesses in the city. Although the city claims that it started sending out notices about the disconnections in March, the report's authors write that they heard "directly from people impacted by the water cutoffs who say they were given no warning and had no time to fill buckets, sinks, and tubs before losing access to water."

"We really don't want to shut off anyone's water, but it's really our duty to go after those who don't pay, because if they don't pay, then our other customers pay for them," department spokesperson Curtrise Garner told [Al Jazeera America](#). "That's not fair to our other customers."

Businesses owe hundreds of thousands of dollars but a decision was made not to disconnect the corporate community:

"According to a department list, the top 40 commercial and industrial accounts have past-due accounts totaling \$9.5 million. That list includes apartment complexes, the Chrysler Group, real estate agencies, a laundromat and even a cemetery."

The only people who apparently are in denial regarding the blatant, surgical and genocidal attacks against them are unfortunately the targets of the attack. Perhaps, Black folks are hoping that US genocidal policy towards our community will be confined to Flint and Detroit. How else can you explain the silence and inaction of black communities across the country?

**Dr. Marsha Coleman-Adebayo** is the author of the Pulitzer Prize nominated: [No FEAR: A Whistleblowers Triumph over Corruption and Retaliation at the EPA](#). She worked at the EPA for 18 years and blew the whistle on a US multinational corporation that endangered South African vanadium mine workers. Marsha's successful lawsuit led to the introduction and passage of the first civil rights and whistleblower law of the 21st century: the Notification of Federal Employees Anti-discrimination and Retaliation Act of 2002 (No FEAR Act). She is Director of Transparency and Accountability for the Green Shadow Cabinet, serves on the Advisory Board of [ExposeFacts.com](#) and coordinates the Hands Up Coalition, DC.

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