

“Ethnic Cleansing” in New Orleans

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Region: [USA](#)

Global Research, June 25, 2006

25 June 2006

“We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.” Richard Baker (R-La), September 09, 2005.

New Orleans, the city where Hurricane Katrina struck in September 2005 is barely covered in the media these days. The failure to report on New Orleans is a deliberate omission as the city and its people continue to suffer. Hurricane Katrina is the precursor to “clean” the city of its African-American population, and creates a resort for affluent Americans and tourists. The aim is to gentrify New Orleans and deny its black poor population their ‘right of return’ to their city.

The “reconstruction” of New Orleans has become a euphemism for the destruction of the city’s cultural and historic heritage. Major developers and real estate agents are taking advantage of the city new development at the expense of New Orleans low-income population. In the current political milieu, economic developments seem to be guided by an extremely narrow vision capable of responding only to big business and tourism.

The Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO), in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) planning to demolish New Orleans’ largest public housing developments and replacing them with unaffordable housing units disguised as “mixed income housing” program (Hope VI). Hope VI program is designed to decentralised poverty according to a neoliberal agenda.

The Secretary of HUD, Alphonso Jackson has announced that more than 5,300 public housing units — built for low income people in New Orleans — were to be demolished and replaced by units for people with a wider range of incomes. It would be the largest in the city’s history, and would include the sprawling low-rises of the St. Bernard, C. J. Peete, B. W. Cooper and Lafitte housing developments, along with most of the city’s public housing. The units had been closed or fenced off to residents since Hurricane Katrina to allow them to deteriorate. The decision was taken despite the shortage of housing to accommodate the over 200,000 still displaced New Orleans residents. Many of the displaced people are living in abandoned housing, without electricity and water. It is possible that more than 3,500 families will have no place to return to if the HUD goes with its decision to demolish the public housing units.

The Hope VI program allows only about 10% of the original population who used to live in public housing to come back. Public schools, healthcare services will be reduced or removed all together to discourage people from returning. Even if they return, there will be no public housing, no public healthcare and not enough public schools for them and their children. The reality is that those “who’ve been planning the recovery process never wanted poor

people to return to the city in the first place”, Lance Hill, the director of the Southern Institute for Education and Research at Tulane University told the *New York Times*. “And they haven’t made it easy” for them to return to their homes. In other words, the victims will be further victimized.

“That’s tantamount to ethnic cleansing,” said Mike Howells, a member of United Front for Affordable Housing. “We know who is going to be shut out as a result of that” added Howells. Furthermore, vacancy rate in New Orleans, especially in areas less affected by Hurricane Katrina is very high but rental is beyond reach for low income people, and landlords are opting to keep their properties closed, further reducing the availability of housing for rent.

In 2000 census New Orleans population constituted of 67.3% black and 28.1 % white. However, in the four months following Hurricane Katrina; “The New Orleans metro area’s population was 37% black between January and August 2005 and fell to 22% between September and December 2005. The percentage of white residents grew from 60% to 73%. Households earning between \$10,000 and \$14,999 annually dropped from 8.3% to 6.5%; while those with a yearly income of between \$75,000 and \$99,999 rose from 10.5% to 11.4%”, according to statistics released by the Census Bureau in June 2006.

The disaster of Hurricane Katrina is used effectively to artificially change the demography of New Orleans. The Population of New Orleans metropolitan area has become substantially whiter, older and less poor — not because people suddenly got richer, but because the poor are being shut off the city — and it shrank to less than half its size, according to the Census Bureau. “New Orleans is not going to be as black as it was for a long time, if ever again”, said Alphonso Jackson, and is moving fast in that direction. It is suggested that only the whites and affluent are encouraged to make New Orleans their home at the expense of African-Americans and their cultural heritage.

The current restructuring of New Orleans provides an excellent social experiment of the new epidemic of privatisation of public housing and public assets. The destruction inflicted by Hurricane Katrina allows politicians, the ruling elites and their cronies to remodel the city as free-market and privately-owned city catering for the rich and tourists. With billions of taxpayers monies made available for “reconstruction”, the disaster brought by Hurricane Katrina is the smokescreen for the gentrification of New Orleans and corporate looting of public resources.

To preserve African-American heritage, African-Americans should be allowed to participate at the forefront in the rebuilding and economic development of New Orleans. The city’s unique history and cultural heritage should inspire new urban invention and economic sustainability, not the neoliberal ideology that have been proven to advance the interests of the rich and affluent.

Furthermore, as a result of total neglect by authorities, low income people of New Orleans are experiencing “a near-epidemic of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder”. The suicide rate in the city of a vibrant African-American heritage “was less than nine a year per 100,000 residents before Katrina, and increased to an annual rate of more than 26 per 100,000 in the months after”, reported the *Times*. The crimes rate has increased dramatically. “I thought I could weather the storm and I did — it’s the aftermath that’s killing me”, Gina Barbe, a New Orleans resident told the *Times*. The response by authorities has been to deploy the National Guard troops to patrol the streets of New Orleans,

pretending to fix the social and economic ill they have created.

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