

The hurricane submerges the city. The victims humiliated by the official rescue workers. The hostility of the National Guard. The help that never arrived. Ordinary citizens who became rescue heroes. Two impromptu reporters describing the New Orleans disaster: left to their own devices, like many others, they readied themselves to survive the catastrophe in a climate of disorganisation and misinformation. Their accusation today: "People suffered more than they should have"

## Inside the hurricane: survival techniques

GLOBAL WARMING 2

by Larry Bradshaw and Lorrie Beth Slonsky

**5** September 2005. Two days after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the Walgreens store on the corner of Royal and Iberville streets was still closed. We had already gone 48 hours without electricity, running water or working plumbing. The high temperature was ruining the milk, yoghurt and cheese. The store-owners had locked up the food, water, nappies and medicines, and abandoned the city. Outside the Walgreens doors, residents and tourists could be seen growing increasingly thirsty and hungry. The much-promised federal, state and local aid never materialised. At a certain point, the looters broke the shop windows. There was an alternative. The police could have broken a small window and distributed nuts, fruit juice and bottles of water in an orderly, systematic way. But they didn't. Instead, they played at cat and mouse for hours, trying to chase off the looters, often only temporarily.

### **The real rescue heroes**

We got out of New Orleans two days ago and arrived home yesterday, Saturday. We have seen all the TV news headline and read a few newspapers. We were contemplating the fact that there were no pictures or photos of the rich and white or European tourists, who were looting Walgreens in the French Quarter. We suspect that the media will have been flooded with heroic images of the National Guard, the troops and police trying to help

the hurricane "victims". But no-one will have been able to see what we did, the real heroes and heroines of the rescue: the working people of New Orleans. The maintenance workers who got their lifts working to carry the sick and disabled. The engineers who set up, powered and got generators going. The electricians, who lashed up temporary electrical power cables over blocks to share out the little electricity that we had to free up cars stuck on the upper decks of the car parks. Nurses who got hold of mechanical fans and who for hours and hours worked them by hand to drive air into the lungs of coma patients, or to keep them alive. Doormen who helped people stuck in lifts. Refinery workers who went to the quays and "stole" boats to rescue their fellow citizens from the roofs of their homes. Mechanics who helped start up any car they could find to take people out of the city. And the cooks and waiters

### **The Authors**

*Larry Bradshaw and Lorrie Beth Slonsky are two American paramedics. They were in New Orleans during the days of the hurricane, attending a conference. We publish their extraordinary testimony about the lack of relief. The article, edited by Teresa Petrangolini, is also to be published in the monthly "Cittadinanzattiva".*

who set up the commercial kitchens to provide soup-kitchen meals for hundreds of desperate people. Many of these workers had lost their homes and were without news from their own family members. But despite this, they stayed and set up the only infrastructure there was for the 20% of New Orleans not under water.

### Official relief effort: did anyone see it?

On the second day, there were at least 500 of us still in the French Quarter hotels: quite a mixed bunch of foreign tourists, conference attendees such as ourselves, local residents who had come to find safety and shelter from Katrina. Some of us had mobile phones, and had contacted our families and friends outside New Orleans. We were repeatedly told that every possible sort of relief and resource, including the National Guard and the buses, was pouring into the city. The buses and other aid must have been invisible, because not one of us saw them.

We then took the decision to rescue ourselves. We pooled our money and managed to get together 25,000 dollars to call ten buses to get us out of the city. Those without the 45 dollars for the ticket were helped by those who had the extra. We waited 48 hours for the buses, standing outside the hotel for the last 12 hours, rationing the limited amount of water, food and clothes we had. We set up a special area for the sick, elderly and new-born. We waited all night for the "imminent" arrival of the buses. They never came! Later on, we discovered that they had been taken over by the military the moment they reached the city limits.

### The hostility of the National Guard

By the fourth day, our hotel had run out of fuel and water. The bathrooms and toilets were horrific. Bit by bit, the situation was becoming more desperate, and the amount of street crime rose along with the water level. The hotels started to kick us out and pull their shutters down, saying that the authorities had told them to send us to the Convention Center to wait for the buses. It was when we got to the Convention Center that we finally came across the National Guard. They told us that we didn't have permission to go to the



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Superdome because these main refuges had to be reserved for the most needy in humanitarian and health terms. The Guard also told us that in the other refuge, the Convention Center, chaos now reigned and the police were not letting any one else in. Of course we asked: "But if we can't go into the only two refuges there are, what's the alternative?" The Guard told us that this was our problem and that they had no water for us. This was just the start of many encounters with the insensitive and hostile law-enforcers.

We walked to the police command centre at Harrah's in Canal Street and got the same reply – we had to sort things out for ourselves and that they had no water. By this time we numbered several hundred. We then held a meeting to decide what to do. We agreed to set up camp outside the police centre. That way, we would be clearly visible to the media and prove an embarrassment to the city authorities. The police told us we couldn't stay there. Ignoring this, we began to organise ourselves and set up camp. Instantly, the police commander crossed the street and told us he had a solution: we should walk to the Pontchartrain Expressway and cross



\_Homeless, evicted from their hotels, the evacuees scrambled to get themselves organised while waiting for the help that took a long time to arrive

the giant New Orleans bridge where the police had rows of buses laid on to take us out of the city. The crowd cheered and set off. We called them back, explaining to the commander that there had been much misinformation going around – was he sure there really were buses waiting for us? The commander turned towards the crowd and said emphatically: “I swear to you that the buses are there”. We got ready, and 200 of us set off for the bridge in great excitement and expectation. As soon as we left the Convention Center, many local residents who saw us so positive and optimistic asked us where we were going. We told them the good news. Whole families then packed up the few things they had and our number rapidly doubled, and then doubled again. Children in prams joined us, people on crutches, the elderly, still others in wheelchairs. We walked for 2-3 miles on the motorway and the other road that took us to the bridge. It also began to rain, but this didn’t dampen our spirits.

### **No-one goes through**

As soon as we got to the bridge, armed sheriffs formed a line across the bridge. Before we got close enough to make ourselves heard, they started shooting over our heads. The crowd fled in all directions. While the people were dispersing, some of us went ahead, trying to start up conversation with one of the sheriffs. We told them what we had been told by the police commander, and the assurances we had had. The sheriffs said there were no buses waiting for us. The commander had lied to get rid of us.

We asked why we couldn’t cross the bridge anyway, given that there was very little traffic on Highway 6. They told us they didn’t want to become like New Orleans and that there wouldn’t be Superdomes in their cities. This was a veiled way of saying: if you are poor and black, you can’t cross the Mississippi and you can’t leave New Orleans.

Our small group turned back on Highway 90 to look for shelter from the rain under a fly-over. We started discussing what to do, and finally decided to set up camp in the middle of the Portchartrain Expressway, between O’Keefe and Tchoupitoulas exits. This way, we reckoned, anyone could see us, and we would be safer, being up on an elevated road. Furthermore, we would be able to see the buses arriving.

Throughout the day, we saw other families, individuals and groups make the same journey up and down the slope, trying to cross the bridge, only to be turned back. Some by a gun, others through simple refusal, still others with verbal insults and humiliations. Thousands of New Orleans residents were stopped from leaving the city on foot under their own steam. Meanwhile, the city’s only two refuges descended into squalor and desperation. The only road to cross the bridge was for vehicles. We had seen people stealing trucks, buses, vans and any car that could be got going. Every vehicle was packed with people trying to escape the desperate scenes of New Orleans.

### **An emergency camp**

Our small camp quickly began to “prosper”. Someone had stolen a water-distribution truck and had brought it along.

Is this looting? A mile back down the highway, a military truck had dropped two sealed sacks of food rations. We brought the food to our camp in shopping bags. Now with the two basic needs – food and water – assured, cooperation, community spirit and creativity began to take flourish. We organised the cleaning. We built beds with wooden pallets and cardboard boxes. We used a run-off channel as a bathroom and the children made a shelter to give privacy, using plastic, broken umbrellas and other bits. We even organised a food recycling system, where people could swap parts of their food rations (apple juice for the babies and biscuits for the children!).

This was a process we witnessed over and over during those days. When people have to fight for food or water, they only worry about themselves. You will do anything to get water for your children or food for your parents. When these basic needs are met, people begin to look outside themselves, towards the other, working together and building a community. Had the relief efforts flooded the city with food and water in the first two or three days, there would have been no desperation, frustration and anger. Now with our basic needs provided, we began to offer food and water to families and individuals who were passing by. Many decided to stay and join us. Our camp grew to 80 or 90 people. From one lady with a battery radio we learnt that the media were talking about us. In full view at the top of the highway, any relief operation or group of journalists would have bumped into us along their way into the city. The authorities had been asked what they intended to do with all those families living out on the highway. The authorities replied that they would be taken care of. Some of us shared an inner thought. "Taken care of" sounded very ominous!

### **"Take care of us"**

Unfortunately, our worst fears were realised. As darkness fell, a Gretna sheriff came up, got down from his vehicle and pointed his gun in our faces, ordering us to "get off the f\*\*\*ing freeway." A helicopter arrived and used the wind from its blades to blast away our fragile structures. As soon as we'd pulled back, the sheriff started



loading up his truck with food and water. Once more, under threat, we were thrown off the highway. All the law-enforcement bodies seemed threatened whenever we congregated in groups of twenty or more. Each group of "victims" they saw as "mob" or "riots". We instead felt greater safety in numbers. Our "we must stick together" was impossible to carry out, because the authorities forced us into small atomised groups.

In the ensuing pandemonium, and with our camp flattened, we split up once again. Reduced to a group of eight, in the dark, we sought shelter in a school bus abandoned beneath the highway on Cilo Street. We tried to hide from possible criminal attacks, but also conceal ourselves from the police and sheriffs with their martial law, curfew and shoot-to-kill policy.

The next day, the eight of us walked most of the day, managed to make contact with the New Orleans fire service, and sought airlift out with the National Guard. The two young guards apologised to us for the scarce resources of the Louisiana Guard. They explained that many of their unit were in Iraq, which meant that they were short-staffed and unable to carry out all the duties assigned to them.



\_Survivors had to keep clear of possible criminal attacks as well as the police, who had orders to shoot on sight

### And, finally, Texas

We arrived at the airport the day mass transport started up. The airport had become another Superdome. The eight of us were crushed in a sea of other humanity, given that the flights were delayed several hours owing to the brief visit of George Bush, at the airport for a photo session. After evacuation by a cargo plane, we reached San Antonio, Texas. There, the humiliation and dehumanisation caused by the official relief operation went on. We were put into buses and taken to a large field where we had to sit and wait for hours on end. Many of the buses lacked air conditioning. In the dark, hundreds of us were made to share potties overflowing with filth. Those who had managed to get out with perhaps just a few torn plastic bags were subject to searches by two police sniffer-dogs. Many of us had not eaten all day: our food rations had been confiscated at the airport since the box set off the metal detector. But even then, no food was distributed to the men, women and children, the elderly or disabled, since they had to wait for hours to

undergo health screening, to make sure they weren't carrying any infectious disease.

This behaviour of the authorities is in stark contrast with the warm and friendly welcome we received from the ordinary Texans. We saw an airline worker give their shoes to someone going barefooted. Strangers in the street offered us money and toiletries, with words of welcome. In contrast, the official relief workers were insensitive, inept and racist. There was more suffering than need be. Lives were lost that did not need to be lost.