

A story from this week's San Francisco Bay View:

'The people who were left to die'

ACLU report details horrors suffered by Orleans Parish prisoners in wake of Katrina

New Orleans – As the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina approaches, the American Civil Liberties Union's National Prison Project released on Thursday "Abandoned & Abused: Orleans Parish Prisoners in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina." The report documents the experiences of thousands of men, women and children who were abandoned at Orleans Parish Prison in the days after the storm.

"The prisoners inside the Orleans Parish Prison suffered some of the worst horrors of Hurricane Katrina," said Eric Balaban, a staff attorney for the National Prison Project. "Because society views prisoners as second-class citizens, their stories have largely gone unnoticed and therefore untold."

In conjunction with the report's release, the National Prison Project urged the president to direct the Department of Justice to evaluate current evacuation plans for Orleans Parish Prison in an effort to determine whether any meaningful improvements have been made over the past year. The ACLU also asked Congress to audit the jail's emergency preparedness plans. The ACLU is calling for a full and immediate investigation into abuses at Louisiana correctional facilities during and after the storm and is also urging the DOJ to make the findings from such an investigation public and accessible to state and federal prosecutors.

The ACLU report describes a history of neglect at Orleans Parish Prison, one of the most dangerous and mismanaged jails in the country. This culture of neglect was evident in the days before Katrina, when the sheriff declared that the prisoners would remain "where they belong," despite the mayor's decision to declare the city's first-ever mandatory evacuation. OPP even accepted prisoners, including juveniles as young as 10, from other facilities to ride out the storm.

As floodwaters rose in the OPP buildings, power was lost, and entire buildings were plunged into darkness. Deputies left their posts wholesale, leaving behind prisoners in locked cells, some standing in sewage-tainted water up to their necks.

"The sheriff's office was completely unprepared for the storm," said Tom Jawetz, litigation fellow for the National Prison Project. "The Louisiana Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals did more for its 263 stray pets than the sheriff did for the more than 6,500 men, women and children left in his care."

Among the testimonies of the people profiled in the ACLU report are these:

Ashley George, one of the 300 children transferred to OPP shortly before the storm from the city's Youth Study Center, said: "When the storm started, water broke through the gate and started rising. The day after the storm, water came into the place, and I was in water up to my neck for a couple of days. We got no food, no water. I felt like I was going to die. The guards didn't do anything to help us.

"We weren't going to get out, but the adult prisoners escaped and got help for us. Military people told us that if we had stayed in there another day we would have drowned. Adults took a mattress and floated some girls out to the boat. I took another boat and went to the bridge, where I got chips and water. ... There were pregnant girls with us also, but they did not get any special attention."

Ashley's grandmother, Ruby Ann George, said: "After the storm I was going crazy. I kept calling and calling and calling and calling. ... They ain't nothing but children. I kept calling all over, but I didn't find out where she was for about a month. ... It's horrible. Nobody should have gone through that — adults or children. They should have gotten them out of there. I was mad. ... If it wasn't for the prisoners, they would have drowned."

Joyce Gilson also told of prisoners helping each other: "The women in our unit stayed in open dorms with triple-stacked bunk beds. At the time of the storm, some women were even sleeping on the floor because there wasn't enough bed space. ...

"Water backed up from the commodes, and sewer water from the flood came under the doors and filled up our unit to the second bunk. We didn't know what was going on, and it was hard to even know what day it was. In our unit there were elderly women who had trouble getting onto the top of the third bunk to avoid the water, and there was at least one pregnant lady who also had trouble. We tried to help those women as best we could.

“My friend Iris Hardeman was really sick, and we were worried about her. We were all trying to stick together, praying, singing, trying to be strong through it all because we didn’t know what was going to happen. We had no food to eat, except the little bit that people had bought from commissary, but we’d eaten all of that long before they finally moved us.

“When it was time to move us, deputies ... told us to get all of the stuff that we could and bring it with us. With no light, we couldn’t find anything, so we just carried out our own bodies, and we held people who couldn’t hold themselves up. ... The water was up to my chest. ...

“They came up to take us out of the building and took us to Central Lock-Up, which was filled with water. ... In Central Lock-Up there were men as well as women. The women were still being pretty supportive of each other, but some men were trying to escape any way they could, and there was shooting around us.

“There were big double doors where the boats were picking people up and we could see outside. We stood up on a truck to get into the boat. They took us to the Overpass and told us to sit down. We were on one side of the bridge and the men were on the other side. There were dogs and other officers there. The officers used plastic cuffs to cuff each woman to the woman next to her. Then they told us to sit down back-to-back with other women.

“There were ice chests full of bottled water on the bridge, and we were asking for the water. We were so thirsty and it was really only then that we started to get wild, really trying to get to the ice chests. They could have given us a piece of ice or something. Some women reached in and that was when they maced us and put the dogs on us. I didn’t get to touch any of the ice.

“Some civilians on the bridge were trying to give us water too, but the officers wouldn’t allow them to get close. Some of them threw bottles to us, and we just tried to get a few sips. They took off the plastic cuffs so I could get into a boat to go to the interstate. On the interstate they put the cuffs back on and told us to sit down again. They threw bottles of water to us, but still no food.

“I was tired and very weak. They had people passing out at that point. I lost sight of my friend Iris at that point and didn’t see her again until we got to Angola and they were deciding where to put us. She died a little while after we got to Angola, but I didn’t see her die because they placed me in a different part of the building.

“I can’t remember how long it was before I found out where my family was — maybe two or three weeks. ... I thank God today that I am alive. With all that we went through, I thought they would really leave us for dead. ... I don’t converse about it because I’m trying to forget it. If I could talk to the Sheriff, it wouldn’t be nothing nice.”

Quantonio Williams said: “On Saturday, August 27, 2005, I was arrested and charged with possession of marijuana. I was taken to the Orleans Parish Prison. ...

“After I had been there a couple of days, the water started rising in the building. When it reached approximately 2 1/2 feet, the detainees were locked down and the corrections officers left. After the staff left, one detainee was able to open his cell door because he had fixed his door so that it would not lock. He got through a broken window to the control area and used the controls to open all the cells in the unit.

“Because the cell doors were now unlocked, everyone was able to go to the second level of the tier, out of the water. The detainees went to a second area in OPP and tried to help other detainees get out of their cells. They were able to get some of the cell doors open so that these detainees could move to the second tier in that area, but they were not able to open the doors for all of the other detainees.

“Then the correctional officers came back and moved us to Templeman III. We were put into a basketball court. There was no plumbing, electricity or air circulation available at this location. When we were first in the basketball court, on the second floor, we had no access to water. The staff all left again.

“After about a day and a half, someone broke glass to get access to a water fountain. We had no food during this entire period and everyone was hungry. People wrote signs and put them in the windows asking for help.

“Eventually someone suggested using the rim of the basketball hoop as a tool to get out of building to try to be able to breathe and get food and water. It took about 12 hours of various detainees working to try to make a hole out of the building. Eventually the detainees managed to create a hole that was barely large enough for some of the smaller prisoners to wiggle through.

“Some of the detainees started to escape. About 30 minutes after people started to escape, I heard a shot. Other detainees told me that a detainee had been shot, but I did not see it.

“Detainees told the staff that we couldn’t breathe and that we needed food and water. The staff went away. Some people tried to escape again. After people would start to escape again, the staff would come back outside. At first, staff tried to keep people from using the hole, but eventually staff told us that if we could get out the hole we could do so, and then they would take custody of us.

“People tied sheets together to go down the wall. Eventually the sheets broke. I believe that some people who got out this way got away, and some were arrested. All told, I was on the basketball court for two days without food, and most of the time without water.

“Eventually the corrections officers said that they were coming in to get us. When we were told that the correctional officers were coming in to take custody of us, we were afraid because we expected them to beat us, based on the reputation of the OPP corrections officers. We lay down on the floor on our stomachs to try to give them no excuse to beat us. There was a lot a staff from other jails, and as it turned out, we did not get beaten.

“We were then escorted to the first floor, where we spent about an hour. The floodwater on the first floor was almost up to my neck. Around 7:00 a.m. I was taken out of Templeman III to an overpass. On the overpass we were put in rows. The rows in front had floodwater coming up to them. The staff who took us told us that we would be given food and water. Although we saw lots of food and bottled water around, we were not given any. We saw the correctional officers drinking the water.

“The sun was bearing down on us, and it was extremely hot. Three boats were taking ten men at a time from the overpass. They took people from the front row. It took a long time to get to the front row, and lots of people were passing out in the sun. ... All the people who had passed out were just left out in the sun to the side, and not transported. One man in this section started acting out, and the correctional officer just sprayed all the people in the area (with mace), including me. ...

“At 5:00 p.m. the boats stopped coming. We were told that we would have to go down from the overpass and climb down scaffolding to the Interstate. We were told that once we got to the Interstate we would get some food and water. We climbed down the scaffolding around 3:00 a.m. When we got down to Interstate 10, we were handcuffed in pairs and we were each given one small paper cup of water but no food. I saw cases and cases of water and boxes of food there. ...

“The guy I was cuffed to and I asked a corrections officer if we could eat an apple we found on the ground and he gave us permission. We each ate half. We asked for more water. The officer said that he would check. He later told us that he was not allowed to give us water. We were eventually put on buses and I fell asleep.

“We were taken to Hunt Correctional Center. When we get there the warden greeted us by saying. ‘So you are the people who were left to die.’ ...

“Eventually we were allowed to stand in line for one two-minute call after 10:00 p.m. I was very fortunate because I was able to reach my wife. After a couple of days, she was able to get through the procedure to get me released on a \$500 bond. I was released on Sept. 22, 2005.”

“These are the untold horrors of Hurricane Katrina,” said ACLU attorney Eric Balaban. “We must preserve these stories to create a record of the tragedy and to ensure that the mistakes detailed in this report are never repeated.”

The report, along with several multimedia features, including a slide show, video footage and maps, is online at www.aclu.org/prison/conditions/26198res20060809.html.