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City's balance undone in many ways

NEW YORK TIMES

NEW ORLEANS They waited, and they waited, and then they waited some more in the 90 degree heat, as many as 5,000 people huddled at a highway underpass on Interstate 10, waiting for buses that never arrived to take them away from the storm they could not escape.

Babies cried. The sick huddled in the shade in wheelchairs or rested on cots.

A few others, less patient, simply started walking west with nowhere to go, like a man pushing a bike in one hand and pulling a shopping cart in another.

But most just waited with resignation sad, angry, incredulous, scared, exhausted, people who seemed as discarded as the empty bottles of water and containers of food that littered the ground.

New Orleans has always existed in a delicate balance between land and water, chaos and order, black and white, the very rich and the very poor. It has been the lacy ironwork of French Quarter balconies, the magical shops and galleries on Royal Street and the cuisine not just at Galatoire's or Mr. B's or Commander's Palace but at humble po-boy joints and neighborhood restaurants in every part of town.

But it has also been a place of crushing poverty, of dreary low-income housing and failing schools, where crime and violence have been an incessant shadow in daily life, as much a part of the local sensibility as the damp, smothering blanket of heat and humidity.

This week, bit by bit, that delicate balance came completely undone. Water took over earth when levees broke, putting 80 percent of the city under water. The mix of fatalism and bravado that allowed the city's biggest fear a killer hurricane to become the national drink of Bourbon Street gave way to terror and despair and horrifying spasms of looting and violence.

New Orleans became unrecognizable not just physically, but psychologically as well. Faced with a disaster of enormous proportions, everything fell apart.

The flood control apparatus, which government officials and scientists had long said was inadequate, failed as some predicted.

The city's evacuation plan worked, except for thousands who were too poor or disabled to find their own way out of the city before the storm. The radios and cell phones that officials and police officers use to communicate failed, erasing any remaining semblance of authority in a city beset by chaos and crime. Any finally, a full federal response came only after the dialogue between local and federal officials devolved into shouting.

Just two months ago new evidence emerged that city and its levees were sinking, increasing the risk of a catastrophic flood, even as federal funds to protect the city were being cut.

As flood waters rose on Tuesday, Sen. Mary L. Landrieu, D-La., tried to impress upon colleagues in Washington that this was America's tsunami, but she said the more she pleaded, the more she felt she was not being heard. Most local officials who were supposed to be running the city eventually left, mainly because they couldn't communicate with the outside world, whose help they desperately needed.

The brewing storm

It began as Tropical Depression 12, yet another swirl of turbulence in the southeastern Bahamas. But each step of the way Hurricane Katrina seemed to overachieve.

"We are facing a storm that most of us have long feared," said Mayor C. Ray Nagin, who urged people on Saturday to leave town and then gave an evacuation order on Sunday, when it looked as if Category 5 storm, with winds as high as 175 miles an hour, could be headed for New Orleans. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime event."

Many of the 1.3 million people in the metropolitan area did that, paralyzing traffic along major highways.

But, as always, many did not. This surprised no one. In a 2003 poll conducted by Louisiana State University researchers, 31 percent of New Orleans residents said they would stay in the city even if a Category 4 hurricane struck.

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Many stayed because they felt they had no choice, particularly the poor and the elderly.

Experts disagreed on whether adequate plans were in place to evacuate the poor, the elderly and the infirm.

"Good Samaritan scenario" Brian Wolshon, an LSU civil engineering professor who served as a consultant on the state evacuation plan, said the city relied almost entirely in its planning on a "Good Samaritan scenario," in which residents would check on elderly and disabled neighbors and drive them out of the city if necessary.

"That was the thinking," Wolshon said. "Maybe even the cornerstone of that plan."

Planning for their evacuation was stymied by a shortage of buses, he said. As many as 2,000 buses, far more than New Orleans possessed, would be needed to evacuate an estimated 100,000 elderly and disabled people.

But Chester Wilmot, an LSU civil engineering professor who studies evacuation plans, said the city successfully improvised. He said witnesses described seeing city buses shuttle residents to the Superdome before Hurricane Katrina struck.

"What I've heard is that there were buses, but they weren't very well utilized," Wilmot said. The two professors agreed that the evacuation of New Orleans residents with cars went well. They said a new "contraflow plan," which used all lanes of I-10 for outbound traffic, relieved congestion that snarled traffic for hours during a voluntary evacuation of the city during Hurricane Ivan in 2001.

"What you're going to find is that everyone who wanted to get out, got out," said Wolshon. "Except for the people who didn't have access to transportation." And then there were the tourists, many of whom came with only the haziest sense of what they were facing and not the slightest idea of what they should do.

Hurricane Betsy in September 1965 had spurred a federal hurricane protection plan for Lake Pontchartrain and vicinity.

But the system that emerged was a compromise from the start, cut back by competing Army Corps of Engineer projects, by pressure from local communities that had to pay part of the cost, and by the tendency to focus more on current costs than on future risks.

Officials settled on a system of levees sufficient to protect against another Hurricane Betsy roughly akin to what is now called a Category 3 storm now, the kind that statistics estimate might strike New Orleans once in 200 years.

Computer simulations showed ever more clearly how New Orleans could swamp like a low boat in high seas under the assault from certain hurricanes. Still, the compromises over

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flood protection persisted.

On Monday, there was nothing dramatic when the levee failed, no sound of an explosion or a crash. At midday, as the storm was blowing out of the city, the Web site of The Times-Picayune quoted residents near the 17th Street canal saying that after experiencing only minor flooding from the storm, suddenly the water in their yards was rising from what seemed to be a breach in the canal. One man said later that afternoon that the water was rising on his house at a rate of one brick span every 20 minutes.

By 4:20 p.m. on Monday, the Web site reported that the water had already rolled through the nearby Lakeview neighborhood and on down to the center of the city. By then, the water in Lakeview had reached the second stories of many houses.

The berms along Lake Pontchartrain had held. The problem was in canals that had been built to carry water pumped from city drains out to the lake. But on Monday, with the lake rising, the flow in the canals reversed.

A surge, probably 10 feet above normal, flowed in from the lake, rising until it began cascading over the top of the sleek, butter-colored walls that stood between the east side of the 17th Street Canal and the city's Bucktown neighborhood. Greg Breerwood, a deputy district engineer for the Army Corps, said it appeared that as the weight of the water pressed on the high part of the wall, the water pouring over the top hit the ground on the other side and ate away at the soil supporting its base.

A section of the wall pushed in and the rush of water turned that breach into a gash as long as a football field, 100 yards. Once the levee broke, most long-time New Orleans residents knew that the city could unravel quickly, with nothing to stop the lake from pouring into neighborhoods that were still dry and surging across a huge city park and into downtown.

Landrieu, who grew up in New Orleans, was at the federal and state command center in Baton Rouge when the first warnings about the break flashed on Monday afternoon. Landrieu knew how reluctant people could be to leave. This was the first time her own father had ever left during a hurricane.

She said in an interview that she knew instantly that thousands who thought they had survived the storm would now be trapped in their houses, racing the rising floodwaters to their second floors, or to their attics or rooftops. The next stage

Landrieu and other local officials suddenly faced a new problem: How to convince federal officials that just one break in one canal with such a mundane name could bring on a cataclysm that would require far more resources than had been needed for the storm itself.

"I have been with Michael Brown since the minute he landed in this center," Landrieu said Friday in Baton Rouge, referring to the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, "and I have been telling him from the moment he arrived about the urgency of the situation."

But, she said, "I just have to tell you that he had a difficult time understanding the enormity of the task before us." Natalie Rule, a spokeswoman for FEMA, disputed Landrieu's account. "There was no doubt in our minds that a Category 3, 4 or 5 headed for New Orleans was going to be dangerous," Rule said.

As the flood control system broke down, so soon did everything else.

Confusion over breached levee There was no immediate announcement that the levee had been breached or what it meant, but different people realized at different times that maybe the bullet had not been dodged, after all.

The evacuation before the storm, as chaotic as it seemed to anyone stuck on the road, was still part of a plan. With the levee break, a whole new ad hoc stage began. There had been no plans for what to do with stranded tourists, and before long, the hotels were closing down.

With the Superdome overloaded and without food or air conditioning, the hotels guided visitors to the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, a huge rectangular building that stretches about a mile and is several hundred yards wide. But soon the situation there devolved into anarchy, too.

"The tourists are walking around there and as soon as these individuals see them, they're being preyed upon. They are beating, they are raping them in the streets," said P. Edwin Compass III, superintendent of police. "We have 15 to 20,000 people in there that are trapped. We have individuals who are getting raped. We have individuals who are getting beaten."

Before dawn on Tuesday, Landrieu's brother, Mitch, the state's lieutenant governor, and Sgt. Troy McConnell of the state police left Baton Rouge to assist in the rescue of flooded residents of the 9th Ward in New Orleans. Landrieu knew the city intimately. But now he was navigating the Lower 9th Ward not by car, but by boat. The four men on board would cut the engine and float in watery silence, listening for calls for help from inside houses or attics.

People yelled from rooftops or waved shirts or rags, as if they were flags, from vents in the attic.

They must have rescued 100 people, Landrieu said, but by the end of the day the mood began to change to one of irritated impatience. Inside New Orleans, city officials were trying to keep some semblance of control over their city, and failing. The most basic reason was a massive breakdown of the communications system.

Finally, hope Friday, for the first time, there was a brisk dose of hope. President Bush's visit to New Orleans, where he met with Nagin, and to the rest of the tattered Gulf Coast region, helped calm some of the tensions.

Referring to the federal emergency actions, Bush said: "What is not working right, we're going to make it right." The first sizable contingent of troops rolled into town and restored a measure of order to the convention center. There was food and water. There was a sense that maybe, things at least would stop getting worse.

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