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Racial Wounds Fester in New Orleans Two Years After Katrina

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The images are scorched into our collective memory. There were survivors carrying what belongings they could salvage, trekking through waist-high sewage in search of high ground; there were images of mothers carrying children and sons pushing fathers in wheelchairs; there were survivors on rooftops with signs held overhead pleading for supplies as helicopters flew past; and there was anguish at the Superdome. There was also the report of survivors, largely black in number, turned back by police at gunpoint on the Gretna Bridge as they sought dry land. There was the talk of being a "refugee" in your own country and the looting of abandoned shops and stores◆all caught on camera.

And there was the constant question of "How could this happen here?"

Today marks the second anniversary of the Katrina disaster, and life amid the protracted rebuilding efforts remains a struggle for many hurricane survivors. But if one factor has been exacerbated by the devastation that nearly leveled New Orleans two years ago, it's the stark racial divide in the city that by many accounts is harsher today than ever.

Charges of political corruption, complaints from those still awaiting federal assistance, a sky-high crime rate and some devastated, mostly black areas that are still untouched by efforts to rebuild have left tensions in the city at an alarming high.

The Black/White Divide

According to a CBS News poll released earlier this week, 45 percent of Americans say at least some progress has been made in the rebuilding efforts, but just 9 percent say there's been a lot of progress. One-third says little or no progress has been made. Not surprisingly, there's a divide between blacks' and whites' beliefs in terms of how much progress has been made. Only 2 percent of blacks say there's been a lot of progress, while another 18 percent say there's been some. Among whites, 11 percent say there's been a lot of progress, while 38 percent say there's been some.

Forty-two percent of blacks have at least some confidence in the government's ability to respond to natural disasters, while 54 percent have little or none. Among whites, 61 percent have at least some confidence.

According to a report in Time, New Orleans' population of 450,000 has dropped to about 300,000, with blacks' share of the population declining from about 70 percent before the storm to 55 percent to 60 percent today.

How did it happen? It seems as if most were on the same page in May of 2006 when the Department of Housing and Urban Development earmarked \$4.6 billion in federal funds to assist homeowners who lost everything in the disaster. The program was to provide up to \$150,000 to eligible homeowners who agreed to repair, rebuild or purchase replacement homes in Louisiana. But the program, which stopped accepting applications in July, has come under fire for excessive bureaucratic red tape as scores of homeowners are still waiting for assistance.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) released a report last week revealing ongoing incidents of racial injustice and human-rights abuses on the Gulf Coast since Katrina. In its report, the ACLU reports numerous civil-rights violations that have occurred in Louisiana and Mississippi since the storm, including reports of heightened, racially motivated police activity, housing discrimination and prisoner abuse.

"As Americans, we should all feel ashamed of the treatment that poor people of color, prisoners, and other vulnerable people have endured in the aftermath of Katrina," said Anthony D. Romero, executive director of the ACLU. "Despite repeated broken promises from politicians, it is terribly disheartening that two years later, this mistreatment still exists. The government cannot be allowed to evade responsibility any longer for its role in the gross civil-rights violations that permeate the Gulf Coast."

The organization is calling on Congress to pass legislation to address post-Katrina issues, including racial profiling, voter disenfranchisement, and the lack of healthcare facilities and low-income housing.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Today, New Orleans appears to be a city starkly divided into black and white. Reports have many white citizens of the city blaming the rising crime rate on "thuggery" of black teens in the city and calls to arm the public. There are charges of black politicians being targeted by white prosecutors

in a power grab for the city's future. And a disturbing case in recent months has further stoked flames between black and white New Orleanians.

Six students in Jena, La., known as the "Jena 6," face attempted murder charges following a December brawl involving a white teen. The teen was treated and released from the hospital, suffering from a swollen and cut face, but one of the students, 17-year-old Mychal Bell, was convicted on a reduced charge of aggravated second-degree battery and faces up to 22 years in prison. The other 5 teens are awaiting trial on attempted murder and conspiracy charges. The case has drawn national attention and the ire of civil-rights leaders.

But Katrina wasn't the beginning of racial strife in the state of Louisiana. Remember, this is the same state where former Ku Klux Klansman David Duke successfully ascended to a runoff in Louisiana's 1991 gubernatorial race. But clearly, the hurricane's devastation exacerbated an already palpable racial divide between the city's haves and have-nots. Inadequate school infrastructure, low wages, high unemployment and shoddy housing are a daily reality for many of the poor black residents of New Orleans. It's a problem that will take much longer to recede than the floodwaters that came with the storm.

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