

**The  
BLACK  
C o m m e n t a t o r**  
Commentary, analysis and investigations  
on issues affecting African Americans  
[www.blackcommentator.com](http://www.blackcommentator.com)

*Issue 158 – November 10 2005*

*No Place to Call Home:  
People of the Dome, Revisited  
by Mitchell Cohen*

(Use the back button on your browser to return to the previous page)

Printer Friendly Version



Copyright © 2002 - 2005  
[www.BlackCommentator.com](http://www.BlackCommentator.com)  
All Rights Reserved

*This article originally appeared in [Counterpunch.org](http://Counterpunch.org).*

*"I'm sick to death of hearing things from uptight narrow-minded pig-headed politicians. All I want is the truth. Just give me some truth." – John Lennon*

As Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf States, many organizations kicked into high gear to send relief to local groups in Mississippi and Louisiana, with no help from the government or formal relief agencies. Among them was the Malcolm X Grassroots movement, with whom the Brooklyn Greens shares an office on Atlantic Avenue. Tons of donated supplies poured into the office and were trucked to Jackson, Mississippi, where they were distributed through community-based efforts.

I spoke daily with Les Evenchick, a Green who lives in the French Quarter of New Orleans. I was also in touch with New Orleans residents Malik Rahim and Mike Howell; the areas in which they live were dry and they were holding out as long as they could. The story they tell is shocking: U.S. and local government officials refused to allow water or food relief into New Orleans. They also turned off the drinking water. Hundreds of people died unnecessarily as a result.

And yet, there was no shortage of water or food being sent – it was just not allowed into the city! When Green Party activists tried to donate water for the people in the Superdome a few days after the levees broke, armed soldiers pointed rifles at them and prevented them from delivering supplies. Even three Wal-Mart trucks loaded with drinking water were denied entry and turned away. No water was allowed into New Orleans. Evenchick says, "this was a brazen attempt to starve people out."

Attempts to starve civilians into leaving an area is a war crime under the Geneva Conventions. Who gave the order to block water and food from entering New Orleans? Who ordered the drinking water inside the city to be turned off? No one has yet answered those questions.

On Thursday of that first week, volunteers whose makeshift boats had rescued over 1,000 people were

## The Black Commentator – No Place to Call Home: People of the Dome, Revisited

ordered to stop, under the pretext that it was too dangerous. The volunteers wanted to continue rescue operations. They said there was little risk, that desperate people had been welcoming them with open arms. The military "convinced" the volunteer rescuers at gunpoint to "cease and desist." They did the same to a state senator who had led a flotilla of hundreds of boats and rafts all the way from Mississippi to rescue people.

Who gave the order to block the volunteer rescue teams in New Orleans? No one has yet answered that question.

Officials claimed that people were trying to shoot down the rescue helicopters. In actuality, a couple of people shot into the air to signal helicopters to pick them up. Yet officials repeated this lie over and over, as justification for shutting down voluntary rescue operations and sending in thousands of fully armed military troops, along with private Blackwater mercenaries fresh from Iraq under orders to "shoot to kill."

Two U.S. military helicopter pilots plucked 110 people from the roofs of their flooded houses. We saw them on T.V. and cheered. When they returned to base they were called into the commander's office. They thought they were going to be given medals. Instead, as reported in the NY Times, their commanding officers reprimanded them and removed them from helicopter duty for "violating orders." Who gave the order not to rescue people?

For more than two weeks, hundreds of volunteer doctors and fire personnel – including a squad from New York City – were denied entry to New Orleans. They were dispatched, instead, to provide backdrop for Bush's photo-ops in other areas. The medical personnel were kept twiddling their thumbs, as people were dying.

A commanding officer of a police squad complained that his 120 cops were provided with only 70 small bottles of water. Hospitals were supplied with nothing. Could FEMA and local officials have forgotten to store bottles of drinking water in the Superdome, Convention Center and hospitals?

The only FEMA official on the scene in the early stages, Marty Bahamonde, has testified to Congress that he begged FEMA director Michael Brown for water, food, toilet paper and oxygen, saying, "many will die within hours." Brown's press secretary, Sharon Worthy, responded that the FEMA director needed more time to eat dinner at a Baton Rouge restaurant that evening. "He needs much more than [sic] 20 or 30 minutes," Worthy wrote. "Restaurants are getting busy," she said. "We now have traffic to encounter to go to and from a location of his choice [sic], followed by wait service from the restaurant staff, eating, etc." Let them eat gumbo.

In an interview by WWL-TV, Mayor Ray Nagin complained vociferously that Louisiana National Guard Blackhawk helicopters were being stopped from dropping sandbags to plug the levees soon after the breach. No repairs were allowed until long after the poor areas of New Orleans were totally flooded.

Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez and Cuba's President Fidel Castro offered millions of dollars and hundreds of doctors to help save lives in New Orleans. They were turned down. Millions of concerned citizens wanted to send assistance as well. FEMA recommended that they send contributions to "Operation Blessing," a front group for rightwing evangelist Pat Robertson. Robertson had recently televised a speech calling for the assassination of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

Can all of these be explained by simple incompetence and negligence, or is there something more sinister going down?

*The Saudi-ization of New Orleans*

## The Black Commentator – No Place to Call Home: People of the Dome, Revisited

Les Evenchick is an independent Green activist who lives in the French Quarter of New Orleans in a 3-story walkup. He points out that people were told to go to the bus depot to evacuate, but the bus station had closed down the night before. Unless you owned a car, Les continued, FEMA and state police would not let you leave.

Hundreds attempting to walk out of New Orleans were forced off the road and ordered back to the Coliseum or Superdome, where no water or food was available. As a consequence the vast majority of the so-called looters were simply grabbing water, food, diapers and medicine. "It's only because of them that old people, sick people, small children were able to survive," Les says. "But the 'anti-looting' hype was used to militarize the area, place it under martial law and disperse the population, mostly Black people, mostly the poor."

These were the people who had twice voted in huge numbers against the candidacy of George Bush, the only area in the state to have done so. The previous year, they also fought off attempts to privatize the drinking water supply, battled Shell Oil's attempt to build a Liquefied Natural Gas facility, and tried to prevent the teardown of public housing – battles in which Mayor Ray Nagin, who had contributed funds to George W. Bush's presidential campaign in 2000 and who was a registered Republican until a few months prior to the 2002 mayoral election, sided with the oil companies and wealthy developers.

Some tourists in the Monteleone Hotel pooled their funds and paid \$25,000 for 10 buses to get them out. The buses were sent (there was no short-age of available buses – why didn't the government use this bus company?) but the military confiscated them for its own use. The tourists were not allowed to leave and were ordered to the Convention Center.

How simple it would have been for the government to have provided buses before the hurricane and throughout the week. AMTRAK says it offered free rides out of town but that City officials never got back to them to finalize arrangements. Evacuating 100,000 people trapped in the city should not be that difficult, it's only 3,000 buses, fewer than come into Washington D.C. for some of the giant antiwar demonstrations. Even at \$2,500 a pop – highway robbery – that would only come to a total of \$7.5 million for transporting out of harm's way all of those who did not have the means to leave.

Thousands of New Orleans residents refused to evacuate. Some didn't want to leave their pets or their homes. Most have no money or place to go. Green activist and former Black Panther Malik Rahim, who lives in the Algiers section – which, like the French Quarter and several other areas above sea-level, remained fairly dry – points out that the government could have and should have provided water and food to residents of New Orleans but intentionally did not do so in order to force people to evacuate by starving them out. This is a crime of the gravest sort.

French Quarter resident Mike Howell adds that the capability had been there to drive water and food right up to the convention center, as those roads were clear – it's the same road the National Guard used to drive into the city.

The evidence is overwhelming that the government intentionally did not allow food or water into New Orleans.

I recently emailed Governor Kathleen Blanco (a Democrat) asking, who ordered the turn-off of the drinking water? There was no health reason to turn it off at the time, as the water is drawn into a separate system from the Mississippi River, not the polluted lake, and filtered through self-powered purification plants separate from the main electric grid. If necessary, people could have boiled their water – strangely, the municipal natural gas used in stoves was still functioning properly as of Thursday night of that first week! I have not received a response from Gov. Blanco.

## The Black Commentator – No Place to Call Home: People of the Dome, Revisited

MSNBC interviewed dozens of people who had managed to get out during the first few days. Every single one interviewed was white.

The people who are poor (primarily Blacks but many poor Whites as well) were locked in the Superdome and not allowed to leave – five days of hell. Those who survived the first dome were then bussed out of the area to another stadium, the AstroDome in Houston.

Call them "People of the Dome."

### ***The Grassroots Organizes Itself***

Gulf Coast resident Latosha Brown reports that the first group to send emergency supplies was TOPS, The Ordinary Peoples Society, a prison ministry in Dothan, Alabama founded and staffed by ex-offenders. They organized food, pooled their money for additional goods and brought the supplies to a second organization of former prisoners in Mobile who distributed them, while they went back to Dothan for more. "That's why we tell everybody now that it was felons who were the first to feed, the first to respond to need, the first to get up and do something. They didn't wait for permission or for a contract. That's real leadership." (See "Rescue Came from the Grassroots: The People, Not FEMA, Saved Themselves," by Bruce Dixon, in The Black Commentator.)

Volunteer medics have now established free clinics with the Common Ground Collective ([www.commongroundrelief.org](http://www.commongroundrelief.org)) in defiance of governmental edicts and machine guns. Others, working in solidarity with tribal leaders, have created a dedicated relief effort for Native American communities ([www.intuitivepath.org/relief.html](http://www.intuitivepath.org/relief.html)). Food Not Bombs volunteers have been feeding people all over the region, with no help from the government or Red Cross ([www.foodnotbombs.net/dollar\\_for\\_peace.html](http://www.foodnotbombs.net/dollar_for_peace.html)).

From Day One, huge war profiteering corporations such as Halliburton, Bechtel and other private contractors began descending on the region, their pockets stuffed with billions of dollars in government handouts. Currently, thousands of poor homeowners and rental tenants – including those unable to return to New Orleans just yet, having been evacuated to the far away domes – are being evicted, says Mike Howell, who is organizing tenants to resist eviction. The phony "reconstruction" of New Orleans begins with the land grab and with Mayor Nagin proposing gambling casinos, which he says would "rescue" the city (while destroying the remaining wetlands).

Many people are resisting this blatant confiscation of their lands and homes. If the resistance grows, New Orleans may soon become known as the first battle of the new American Revolution.

*Mitchel Cohen is co-editor of "G", the newspaper of the NY State Greens. He can be reached at: [mitchelcohen@mindspring.com](mailto:mitchelcohen@mindspring.com).*