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Watermark

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Social Justice and Ecology

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In recent months, many different parts of the world have been shaken by natural disasters, including the Boxing Day Tsunami, The Central Asian Earthquake and landslides in Central America. The effects of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans and its surrounds were unexpected and shocking, and received a lot of coverage. It was hard to understand why so many people were suffering, without help from their government, in the richest country in the world.

“They told us to go to the Convention Center. It took us two days to get there. We walked the water through the darkness, flashing flashlights on each other to make sure nobody drowned. Oh, that water. Gas, oil, brake fluid, chains, bodies, snakes--everything. All kinds of snakes.”

[New Orleans Resident, Tysuan Harris]

As many as 125,000 people were trapped in the city in the immediate aftermath of the Hurricane. The storms in New Orleans brought the massive disparities in wealth in the US into stark relief. It appeared that only people who could afford to leave New Orleans were protected from the chaos that descended on the city. Those with very few financial resources: the elderly, the sick, the unemployed, those living below the poverty line – had no way out.

This issue of *Watermark* will examine the fact that it is the poor who suffer disproportionately from any kind of environmental disaster. The New Orleans tragedy is played out all over the world whenever there is a natural disaster. Global Warming and the resulting environmental havoc means that such disasters will inevitably become more frequent. People who care about the environment also need to focus their attention on the people who bare the brunt of environmental disasters.

It is also important to critically examine the fact that Hurricane Katrina's effect on New Orleans got so much coverage, while others mentioned above were not widely reported.

NEW ORLEANS

The Social Consequences

Displacement An estimated 1.3 million people were displaced from metropolitan New Orleans. While some have returned to damaged homes, many are unable to return because houses are uninhabitable. There has been an influx of refugees from the storm into surrounding states. Refugees are living in varying levels of comfort. Those that can afford it have rented accommodation, and set about re-establishing their lives. Others are living in shelters, or with family and friends interstate.

Education More than 100,000 school aged children were displaced by the storm. Schools interstate that weren't hit are attempting to accommodate them.

Poverty About 150,000 of those displaced were living below the poverty line before displacement. Many of those people do not have the resources to come back and rebuild their lives in the city. They have been forced to try and start again wherever they evacuated to.

Jobs the city of New Orleans has been forced to sack non-essential staff in many city-run institutions. Up to 3000 people lost their jobs in early October because the city could not afford to pay them. Many of those who have lost their jobs have also lost homes.



The Environmental Fallout

§ **Chemical Contamination:** One of the challenges is to address the environmental damage caused by Hurricane Katrina, including toxic waste spread by the flooding. The area is contaminated by oil and chemical leaks, as well as human waste and bacteria. Floodwater was also contaminated by arsenic and lead from the paint and batteries of the approximately 350,000 cars that were submerged by the floods. Houses that were flooded and damaged are contaminated with asbestos and mould.

§ **Contaminated Water:** To make New Orleans habitable, large amounts of floodwater are being pumped into the Mississippi River and Lake Ponchartrain. There are fears that the chemicals and pollution in this water, which has been described as a 'vile, stagnant chemical soup', will kill fish and poison the Wetlands near New Orleans, at the mouth of the Mississippi River.

§ 40 percent of the **coastal wetlands** in Mississippi have been so damaged they're no longer able to perform their ecological function as a natural water filter and habitat to birds and wildlife.

Was Hurricane Katrina the Result of Climate Change?

While President Bush has been quick to dismiss climate change as a contributing factor to the severity of Hurricane Katrina, some scientists are making links. The number of category 4 or 5 hurricanes (the most serious) has nearly doubled in the past 35 years. Some scientists say that as hurricanes draw their energy from warm ocean water, increased temperature of the world's oceans due to a global rise in temperature is bound to make severe hurricanes a regular occurrence.

[To find out more: the New York Times (www.nytimes.com), and the Washington Post (www.washingtonpost.com) have in-depth 'special reports' on the hurricane and its aftermath]

Global Warming: What can we expect?

Few scientists deny that the world is heating up. There is increasing consensus that it is happening, and that it is human induced. Climate change means increasing temperatures in various regions, rising sea levels, and increasing extremity of weather patterns.

Rising Sea Levels: Low lying Pacific Islands are already feeling the brunt of climate change. Rising seas have swallowed surrounding islets and contaminated drinking water. Additionally, sea water is seeping into soil, making it unsuitable for growing food. This is a huge problem for islands like the nation of Tuvalu. 80% of Tuvalu's land mass is only 2 metres above sea level. Scientists predict that water levels could rise by more than a metre in the next century. As many as 100 million people around the world live in areas that are below sea level or liable to storm surge.

Extreme Weather: In June 2005, UN scientists warned that one in six countries in the world face food shortages because of droughts that could become semi-permanent as the earth continues to heat up.

Refugees: The UN Institute for Environment and Human Security estimates that rising sea levels, desertification, and shrinking freshwater supplies will create up to 50 million refugees by the end of the decade. Environment disasters displace more people than war, but environmental refugees are not provided for in any international agreements.



The Consequences for Majority Countries

The World Bank's World Development Report, 2000 estimated that 97% of natural disaster-related deaths occur each year in the majority world. How can this be? The answer lies partly in geography. Some areas are more susceptible to floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and other natural disasters. So why are many people in the majority world forced to live in dangerous locations? There are many reasons – to be near employment, because they have a close connection to traditional land, because it is the only place they can afford to live. Indeed the latter was the case for many living in New Orleans.

Additionally, many people in the majority world do not have the resources to spend money on high quality materials for housing that provide some protection against cyclones, tsunamis and floods. Nor would they be able to afford insurance which makes it very difficult to start again after a natural disaster. Many majority countries are also unable to invest much in disaster rescue infrastructure which can mean that less people are likely to be assisted in the crucial few days following a disaster.

For these reasons it is important for the international community to respond immediately to emergencies. It is also important to have stages of response which include helping people to re-establish their livelihoods. Community consultation and participation are also vital.

[For further information about the link between natural disasters and poverty see an excerpt from Caritas Australia's tsunami resource at www.caritas.org.au/emergencies/asiaEarthquake/secondary_resource/secondary_05.pdf
http://www.caritas.org.au/emergencies/asiaEarthquake/secondary_resource/secondary_05.pdf]

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What's in a label?

There is always some concern in imposing labels to describe different parts of the world. In the past the world has been divided into "first world" and "third world" or "developed" and "developing". These terms are problematic because they are value-laden, privileging for example economic and resource wealth over culture and social cohesion. It is also important to ask from whose perspectives are these labels named?

In recent times, the less value-laden terms "majority world" and "minority world" are being used to describe the distribution of wealth and resources.

The majority world which consists of 80% of the world's population uses 14% of the world's wealth.

The minority world which consists of 20% of the world's population uses 86% of the world's wealth.

The Kyoto Protocol

Links have been drawn between Hurricane Katrina and climate change. The USA, under president Bush, refused to sign the Kyoto protocol, which aims to control the pollution that causes climate change.

During various stages of climate negotiations before they refused to sign, the US complained about the apparent unfairness in the Kyoto Protocol, which doesn't commit developing nations to the same levels of reductions in global warming pollutants.

However, what Washington did not mention is that generally, majority nations are NOT the ones who have caused the pollution for the past 150 or so years and that it would be unfair to ask them to cut back for the mistakes of the currently industrialized nations.

When the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was formulated and then signed and ratified in 1992 by most of the world's countries (including the United States and other nations who would later back out of the subsequent Kyoto protocol), the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities was acknowledged. In short, this principle recognized that:

The largest share of historical and current global emissions of greenhouse gases has originated in developed countries;

Per capita emissions in developing countries are still relatively low;

The share of global emissions originating in developing countries will grow to meet their social and development needs.

Interested? Go to <http://www.globalissues.org/EnvIssues/GlobalWarming/Justice.asp>