

New Orleans Is Awaiting Deliverance

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NEW ORLEANS, Sept. 1 - These are the scenes of a dying city: an elderly woman dead in a wheelchair outside the convention center, a note on her lap bearing her name. A horrified family telling tales of pirates commandeering rescue boats at gunpoint. Corpses left rotting in broad daylight. Angry crowds chanting for the television cameras, "We're dying!" or simply "Help!"

In a scene repeated many times Thursday, military helicopters rescued residents from the nightmare of New Orleans. On the ground, people searched for food and dry spots.

Thousands gathered at an evacuation post in Metairie, a suburb of New Orleans.

On the streets of this submerged town, the anxiety and deprivation that had built up over four days gave way on Thursday to misery, despair and anger as the refugees of Hurricane Katrina waited yet another day for their deliverance.

While the authorities issued progress reports on the evacuation effort and reassured the rest of the nation that help was on the way, the stranded thousands here heard none of it. Left with little or no food, water, medical care or even police protection, they looked out in fear or lashed out in rage at a world that seemed to have forgotten them.

"They're not organized," said Curtis Green, 38, a cook who stood waiting in a throng of thousands outside the Superdome, waiting for buses to take them away. "Nobody has any plans. We're depending upon them for food, water and shelter. Who's in charge?"

Outside the convention center, in a once-prosperous section of town, at least a half-dozen corpses lay slumped in lawn chairs or covered with makeshift shrouds. An estimated 25,000 people congregated there, many lamenting that the authorities had directed them there, then left them in the sweltering heat without food, water, medical care or security.

A weeping young woman held out her dehydrated-looking child and pleaded for help. "This is not about rich people or poor people," she said. "This is about people."

All over the city hung a sense of helplessness, of an anarchy that not even top officials could pin down with hard facts or figures.

"We have individuals who are getting raped," the city's police superintendent, Edwin P. Compass III, said in a brief interview about the scene at the convention center. "We have individuals who are getting beaten."

Asked about the numerous accounts of rapes, Joseph H. Matthews, a deputy fire chief and the director of the city's Office of Emergency Preparedness, said some were "probably" true. "Nothing's been confirmed, but you can't discount these reports," Mr. Matthews said.

The evacuation was proceeding slowly at the Superdome, where the largest group of refugees - about 30,000 - were being loaded onto buses, most of them for the 350-mile trip to the Astrodome in Houston. As they boarded, other refugees from around the city who had heard of the buses' arrival streamed into the arena.

Kayresa Newman's baby was passing out in her arms as the dense, surging crowd at the Superdome flattened them against a chest-high steel fence. They were stuck in the sweating, frantic mass of people trying to edge toward the gate leading to buses evacuating the ovenlike arena with its overflowing toilets. "I need to get this kid out of here," she said to the armed soldiers trying to control the crowd.

Squeezed in behind her, barely able to move, Isabel Capo was sobbing. Wedged near her at the front of the wall of hungry, unbathed refugees, James Edwards was trying to tell the soldiers about his bad heart.

Like passengers on a doomed ship, they were desperate to get out of the noxious, violence-ridden stadium. The sick were supposed to be getting priority. But the soldiers, overwhelmed by the enormity of the task of getting the people on the buses, were having trouble distinguishing degrees of need. So they were mostly letting people go to the buses first come, first served.

Buses trickled in slowly through the day under armed guard. Thousands stood out in the open waiting for their chance, alternatively baking under a blazing sun and being soaked by a drizzling rain. Many had been feeling neglected and abused in the understaffed and undersupplied arena and the waiting only made them angrier.

Over and over, people collapsed in the ankle-deep water as they got near the buses, some suffering from the lack of their usual medication and others stumbling from weakness. Early Thursday the atmosphere in the dome seemed to be veering toward anarchy. Shortly after midnight, the military said, a man attacked a patrolling National Guard soldier with a metal club in a darkened locker room. The man tried to take the soldier's M-16 rifle. They struggled and three gunshots echoed through the stadium, one bullet lodging in the soldier's leg. The man fled, but a heavily armed Special Response Team in black baseball caps tracked him down, and he was arrested.

