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From Gonaïves to New Orleans: Reflections on the Gulf Coast Tragedy

Images of Gulf Coast residents killed or left homeless by Hurricane Katrina in early September have come as a shock to many Americans, who are unaccustomed to seeing such stark misery within our country, the most affluent and powerful in the world. If any nation would be able to respond promptly and effectively to a “natural disaster,” Americans thought, it would be their own. People exclaimed over and over, “This can’t happen in America.” But disasters are never wholly and purely “natural,” as the residents of New Orleans and dismayed onlookers have discovered. How can we pretend that racism, a social

disaster, played no role in the aftermath of Katrina?

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, a number of observers have compared the desperate situation in New Orleans to that in Haiti, a country familiar to journalists as this hemisphere’s most vulnerable, as far as bad weather is concerned. In May 2004, flooding in southern Haiti, near the Dominican border, killed 1,700 people. Then, in mid-September, Tropical Storm Jeanne touched Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic before moving towards Haiti. Without ever making landfall in Haiti, Jeanne thrashed the island’s denuded hills with torrents of rain. Avalanches of water and mud rolled from

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Based in Boston, Massachusetts, PARTNERS IN HEALTH works hand-in-hand with its partners in Haiti, Peru, Russia, Boston, and Rwanda. Since 1987 we have dedicated ourselves to developing and implementing a unique model of health care, bringing an ethic of social justice to the practice of medicine.



Dlo se lavi: water is life, but it can also be deadly. From the intentional flooding of central Haiti’s Artibonite Valley in the 1950s (which resulted in the displacement of the population Zanmi Lasante serves today) to the devastation caused by recent tsunamis, tropical storms, and hurricanes, we have been witness to the disproportionate suffering of the poor.

From Gonaïves to New Orleans *continued*

the hills to the coast. The death toll in Haiti, as of October 4, 2004, stood at 1,970, with another 884 reported missing and most presumed dead. Over 300,000 people, most in the hardest-hit city of Gonaïves, were left homeless.

There are many reasons why Jeanne, a slow-moving tropical storm with relatively low wind speeds, caused such devastation in a country it never even crossed, and those reasons are social. And just as those left behind in New Orleans had to suffer humiliation and uncertainty, in spite of the valiant efforts of many, so too did Jeanne's survivors. As the huge toll taken in Haiti by Jeanne came to light, journalists arrived to cover the story and, again, the story will sound familiar to those following Katrina. CNN reported that U.N. peacekeepers, in place since the violent overthrow of Haiti's elected government in February, 2004, "fired into the air to keep a hungry crowd at bay" and "fired smoke grenades as crowds of Haitian flood victims tried to break into a food distribution site" (for more on food and agricultural insecurity in Haiti, see "Harvesting Hope" in this issue of the *PIH Bulletin*).

It's no wonder that New Orleans's and Haiti's disasters sound similar. Many Americans have forgotten that the Louisiana Purchase was the direct result of Napoleon's defeat at the hands of the Haitians in 1804. Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, in exile in South Africa, made reference to this history in a condolence note made public recently: "The connection [between Haiti and Louisiana] ... finds new root in a shared human suffering caused by ... catastrophic storm and ensuing

floods." The Jamaican writer John Maxwell, one of the most perceptive commentators on Haiti and on the history of the Americas in general, commented pointedly on these connections Haiti and the poor of New Orleans are, he wrote, now linked by yet another bond: catastrophe following the "decapitation of democracy."


After Katrina, the images of the dead and dying, the squalor and ruin of cities, the hopelessness and despair of some of the survivors, have shaken us profoundly. But have they shaken us enough? Some had not realized that such desperate poverty existed in the United States, or that a substantial segment of our population lives without ready access to basic services, such as education and health care, that most in "developed" countries take for granted. And things are not getting better. Since 2003, 800,000 more Americans are without health insurance, and an estimated 1.1 million more Americans have slipped below the poverty line.

The best monument to the catastrophe in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, it has been noted by many, would be a serious national effort to address the poverty and inequality that afflicts the entire country. But can we respond effectively by addressing poverty in our own country alone? The shared history of Louisiana and Haiti reminds us that cultures, populations, hurricanes and need refuse to be confined by national borders.

All of us at Partners In Health are confident that the American people will respond generously to the great need of those hit by Katrina. We know a lot about American generosity, because that's what permits us to do our work in Rwanda, Haiti, Peru,

Boston, and elsewhere. But Katrina is also the latest reminder that the project of reconstruction must be underpinned by a vision of a world without indecent poverty, without racism, and without the accelerating divestment in public infrastructures now registered in the United States and elsewhere.

The collapse of New Orleans's levees is as clear a message as possible about the risk of gutting public works. The siphoning of resources away from public health will mean that Katrina's wake will include precisely the sort of misery seen in Haiti and in the poorer regions afflicted by last year's tsunami. The great vulnerability to which we expose all those who lack fundamental social and economic rights, including the right to be protected from foreseeable and, indeed, predicted disasters, is a cause worth fighting for. In a reflection on the impact of Tropical Storm Jeanne, Julia Taft, writing for the *New York Times*, concluded that "The biggest killer in natural disasters is poverty. The same hurricane tides that flood houses in Florida sweep away entire neighborhoods in places like Gonaïves, Haiti. And while survivors need places to live, simply rebuilding their tin-roofed shacks in flood plains guarantees they will suffer again."

Allaying human suffering and promoting human dignity, at home and abroad, are part of the prescription and the reason for rebuilding. Addressing persistent poverty, at home and abroad, remains our most pressing task. 

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