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New Orleans: Prisoners Abandoned to Floodwaters

Officers Deserted a Jail Building, Leaving Inmates Locked in Cells

(New York, September 22, 2005)—As Hurricane Katrina began pounding New Orleans, the sheriff's department abandoned hundreds of inmates imprisoned in the city's jail, Human Rights Watch said today.

Inmates in Templeman III, one of several buildings in the Orleans Parish Prison compound, reported that as of Monday, August 29, there were no correctional officers in the building, which held more than 600 inmates. These inmates, including some who were locked in ground-floor cells, were not evacuated until Thursday, September 1, four days after flood waters in the jail had reached chest-level.

"Of all the nightmares during Hurricane Katrina, this must be one of the worst," said Corinne Carey, researcher from Human Rights Watch. "Prisoners were abandoned in their cells without food or water for days as floodwaters rose toward the ceiling."

Human Rights Watch called on the U.S. Department of Justice to conduct an investigation into the conduct of the Orleans Sheriff's Department, which runs the jail, and to establish the fate of the prisoners who had been locked in the jail. The Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, which oversaw the evacuation, and the Orleans Sheriff's Department should account for the 517 inmates who are missing from the list of people evacuated from the jail.

Carey spent five days in Louisiana, conducting dozens of interviews with inmates evacuated from Orleans Parish Prison, correctional officers, state officials, lawyers and their investigators who had interviewed more than 1,000 inmates evacuated from the prison.

The sheriff of Orleans Parish, Marlin N. Gusman, did not call for help in evacuating the prison until midnight on Monday, August 29, a state Department of Corrections and Public Safety spokeswoman told Human Rights Watch. Other parish prisons, she said, had called for help on the previous Saturday and Sunday. The evacuation of Orleans Parish Prison was not completed until Friday, September 2.

According to officers who worked at two of the jail buildings, Templeman 1 and 2, they began to evacuate prisoners from those buildings on Tuesday, August 30, when the floodwaters reached chest level inside. These prisoners were taken by boat to the Broad Street overpass bridge, and ultimately transported to correctional facilities outside New Orleans.

But at Templeman III, which housed about 600 inmates, there was no prison staff to help the prisoners. Inmates interviewed by Human Rights Watch varied about when they last remember seeing guards at the facility, but they all insisted that there were no correctional officers in the facility on Monday, August 29. A spokeswoman for the Orleans parish sheriff's department told Human Rights Watch she did not know whether the officers at Templeman III had left the building before the evacuation.

According to inmates interviewed by Human Rights Watch, they had no food or water from the inmates' last

meal over the weekend of August 27-28 until they were evacuated on Thursday, September 1. By Monday, August 29, the generators had died, leaving them without lights and sealed in without air circulation. The toilets backed up, creating an unbearable stench.

"They left us to die there," Dan Bright, an Orleans Parish Prison inmate told Human Rights Watch at Rapides Parish Prison, where he was sent after the evacuation.

As the water began rising on the first floor, prisoners became anxious and then desperate. Some of the inmates were able to force open their cell doors, helped by inmates held in the common area. All of them, however, remained trapped in the locked facility.

"The water started rising, it was getting to here," said Earrand Kelly, an inmate from Templeman III, as he pointed at his neck. "We was calling down to the guys in the cells under us, talking to them every couple of minutes. They were crying, they were scared. The one that I was cool with, he was saying 'I'm scared. I feel like I'm about to drown.' He was crying."

Some inmates from Templeman III have said they saw bodies floating in the floodwaters as they were evacuated from the prison. A number of inmates told Human Rights Watch that they were not able to get everyone out from their cells.

Inmates broke jail windows to let air in. They also set fire to blankets and shirts and hung them out of the windows to let people know they were still in the facility. Apparently at least a dozen inmates jumped out of the windows.

"We started to see people in T3 hangin' shirts on fire out the windows," Brooke Moss, an Orleans Parish Prison officer told Human Rights Watch. "They were wavin' em. Then we saw them jumping out of the windows . . . Later on, we saw a sign, I think somebody wrote 'help' on it."

As of yesterday, signs reading "Help Us," and "One Man Down," could still be seen hanging from a window in the third floor of Templeman III.

Several corrections officers told Human Rights Watch there was no evacuation plan for the prison, even though the facility had been evacuated during floods in the 1990s.

"It was complete chaos," said a corrections officer with more than 30 years of service at Orleans Parish Prison. When asked what he thought happened to the inmates in Templeman III, he shook his head and said: "Ain't no tellin' what happened to those people."

"At best, the inmates were left to fend for themselves," said Carey. "At worst, some may have died."

Human Rights Watch was not able to speak directly with Orleans Parish Sheriff Marlin N. Gussman or the ranking official in charge of Templeman III. A spokeswoman for the sheriff's department told Human Rights Watch that search-and-rescue teams had gone to the prison and she insisted that "nobody drowned, nobody was left behind."

Human Rights Watch compared an official list of all inmates held at Orleans Parish Prison immediately prior to the hurricane with the most recent list of the evacuated inmates compiled by the state Department of

Corrections and Public Safety (which was entitled, "All Offenders Evacuated"). However, the list did not include 517 inmates from the jail, including 130 from Templeman III.

Many of the men held at jail had been arrested for offenses like criminal trespass, public drunkenness or disorderly conduct. Many had not even been brought before a judge and charged, much less been convicted.

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