From Margins of Society to Center of the Tragedy

By DAVID GONZALEZ

The scenes of floating corpses, scavengers fighting for food and desperate throngs seeking any way out of New Orleans have been tragic enough. But for many African-American leaders, there is a growing outrage that many of those still stuck at the center of this tragedy were people who for generations had been pushed to the margins of society.

The victims, they note, were largely black and poor, those who toiled in the background of the tourist havens, living in tumbledown neighborhoods that were long known to be vulnerable to disaster if the levees failed. Without so much as a car or bus fare to escape ahead of time, they found themselves left behind by a failure to plan for their rescue should the dreaded day ever arrive.

"If you know that terror is approaching in terms of hurricanes, and you've already seen the damage they've done in Florida and elsewhere, what in God's name were you thinking?" said the Rev. Calvin O. Butts III, pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. "I think a lot of it has to do with race and class. The people affected were largely poor people. Poor, black people."

In the days since neighborhoods and towns along the Gulf Coast were wiped out by the winds and water, there has been a growing sense that race and class are the unspoken markers of who got out and who got stuck. Just as in developing countries where the failures of rural development policies become glaringly clear at times of natural disasters like floods or drought, many national leaders said, some of the United States' poorest cities have been left vulnerable by federal policies.

"No one would have checked on a lot of the black people in these parishes while the sun shined," said Mayor Milton D. Tutwiler of Winstonville, Miss. "So am I surprised that no one has come to help us now? No."

The subject is roiling black-oriented Web sites and message boards, and many black officials say it is a prime subject of conversation around the country. Some African-Americans have described the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina as "our tsunami," while noting that there has yet to be a response equal to that which followed the Asian tragedy.

Roosevelt F. Dorn, the mayor of Inglewood, Calif., and the president of the National Association of Black Mayors, said relief and rescue officials needed to act faster.

"I have a list of black mayors in Mississippi and Alabama who are crying out for help," Mr. Dorn said. "Their cities are gone and they are in despair. And no one has answered their cries."

The Rev. Jesse Jackson said cities had been dismissed by the Bush administration because Mr. Bush received few urban votes.

"Many black people feel that their race, their property conditions and their voting patterns have been a factor in the response," Mr. Jackson said, after meeting with Louisiana officials yesterday. "I'm not saying that myself, but what's self-evident is that you have many poor people without a way out."

In New Orleans, the disaster's impact underscores the intersection of race and class in a city where fully two-thirds of its residents are black and more than a quarter of the city lives in poverty. In the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood, which was inundated by the floodwaters, more than 98 percent of the residents are black and more than a third live in poverty.

Spencer R. Crew, president and chief executive officer of the national Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, said the aftermath of the hurricane would force people to confront inequality.

"Most cities have a hidden or not always talked about poor population, black and white, and most of the time we look past them," Dr. Crew said. "This is a moment in time when we can't look past them. Their plight is coming to the forefront now. They were the ones less able to hop in a car and less able to drive off."

That disparity has been criticized as a "disgrace" by Charles B. Rangel, the senior Democratic congressman from New York City, who said it was made all the worse by the failure of government officials to have planned.

"I assume the president's going to say he got bad intelligence, Mr. Rangel said, adding that the danger to the levees was clear.

"I think that wherever you see poverty, whether it's in the white rural community or the black urban community, you see that the resources have been sucked up into the war and tax cuts for the rich," he said.

Outside Brooklyn Law School yesterday, a man selling recordings of famous African-Americans was upset at the failure to have prepared for the worst. The man, who said his name was Muhammad Ali, drew a damning conclusion about the failure to protect New Orleans.
"Blacks ain't worth it," he said. "New Orleans is a hopeless case."

Among the messages and essays circulating in cyberspace that lament the lost lives and missed opportunities is one by Mark Naison, a white professor of African-American Studies at Fordham University in the Bronx.

"Is this what the pioneers of the civil rights movement fought to achieve, a society where many black people are as trapped and isolated by their poverty as they were by segregation laws?" Mr. Naison wrote. "If Sept. 11 showed the power of a nation united in response to a devastating attack, Hurricane Katrina reveals the fault lines of a region and a nation, rent by profound social divisions."

That sentiment was shared by members of other minority groups who understand the bizarre equality of poverty.

"We tend to think of natural disasters as somehow even-handed, as somehow random," said Martin Espada, an English professor at the University of Massachusetts and poet of a decidedly leftist political bent who is Puerto Rican. "Yet it has always been thus: poor people are in danger. That is what it means to be poor. It's dangerous to be poor. It's dangerous to be black. It's dangerous to be Latino."

This Sunday there will be prayers. In pews from the Gulf Coast to the Northeast, the faithful will come together and pray for those who lived and those who died. They will seek to understand something that has yet to be fully comprehended.

Some may talk of a divine hand behind all of this. But others have already noted the absence of a human one.

"Everything is God's will," said Charles Steele Jr., the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta. "But there's a certain amount of common sense that God gives to individuals to prepare for certain things."

That means, Mr. Steele said, not waiting until the eve of crisis.

"Most of the people that live in the neighborhoods that were most vulnerable are black and poor," he said. "So it comes down to a lack of sensitivity on the part of people in Washington that you need to help poor folks. It's as simple as that."

Contributing reporting from New York for this article were Andy Newman, William Yardley, Jonathan P. Hicks, Patrick D. Healy, Diane Cardwell, Anemona Hartocollis, Ronald Smothers, Jeff Leeds, Manny Fernandez and Colin Moynihan. Also contributing were Michael Cooper in Albany, Gretchen Ruethling in Chicago, Brenda Goodman in Atlanta and Carolyn Marshall in San Francisco.