

Women's eNews

September 4, 2005

Rapes in New Orleans Chaos Were Avoidable

By Nancy Cook Lauer - WeNews correspondent

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (WOMENSENEWS) – Overwhelmed by the utter challenge of quickly moving tens of thousands of hurricane survivors to safe ground, Louisiana and federal officials had no time to ensure the security of New Orleans' most vulnerable: children, women and the elderly.

Following unconfirmed reports that girls as young as 10 were raped inside the Louisiana Superdome and convention center, relief workers now say they've taken steps to ensure that large shelters such as the Houston Astrodome will provide a safe haven for refugees.

“We have been hearing about episodes of violence, including rape,” said Dr. Julie Gerberding, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Reuters reported Thursday.

That is unacceptable to organizations such as Amnesty International, which monitors governments, shelters, prisons and refugee camps around the world for human rights violations. Relief groups have an obligation to make vulnerable populations a top priority when planning and operating shelters, said Sheila Dauer, director of women's human rights for Amnesty International USA, in an interview Friday night with Women's eNews.

“The authorities are responsible for making sure these vulnerable populations are protected,” Dauer said. “With thousands of people thrown in there together, there are people extremely vulnerable to violence and abuse, the very young, the very old, women, children, and they have a human right to be protected.”

Law Enforcement Was Lacking

A key ingredient of this new protection is a very visible presence of law enforcement officers in the Astrodome, something that was lacking in the Louisiana shelters during the early stages of the disaster, said Margaret Pepe, client services administrator for the American Red Cross.

“In the shelters that are being established for evacuees, we are very well aware of the vulnerability of this population,” Pepe said. “By a very large visible presence of law enforcement keeping a much higher profile, we hope to avoid some of the problems these supershelters pose.”

Until the end of the week, the few police monitoring the Superdome, for example, primarily guarded the perimeter and didn’t mingle with the evacuees inside. Police at the Astrodome will be inside, talking with people and watching for telltale signs of abuse or potential abuse such as antisocial behavior and grownups who spend too much time following, hanging around or playing with children who are not their own.

Crisis counselors and psychologists will also be a big part of the mix in the new shelters being opened to take in evacuees, Pepe said.

“We are very vigilant,” she said. “We are very protective of our shelterees.”

The sheer size of the shelters and their many hiding places, coupled with a lack of lighting due to power outages, makes them less than ideal for emergency housing, said Pepe. She hopes the advance planning that went into making the Astrodome available will help alleviate some of those problems.

Establishing order and preventing crime should be the first priority of emergency management officials, and shelters should have stockpiles of food and medical supplies before they are brought into operation, say Florida emergency coordinators. Florida, which has had so many hurricanes in the past two years that coordinators perform their duties almost by rote, is lending its expertise, millions of dollars in aid and hundreds of personnel to its neighbors to the west.

Florida Prefers Small Shelter System

In the fallout following five major hurricanes in the past 12 months, Florida has moved toward using smaller community shelters holding several hundred people mixed with law enforcement, counselors and aid workers when possible, said Luci Hadi, who is a key coordinator of emergency response for the Florida Department of Children and Families.

Advance preparation is crucial, Hadi said Friday.

“The difficulty that you have with these huge shelters is that they were never, never designed for this kind of work. There’s no infrastructure provided, there’s no stockpiling of food and water, there’s no infrastructure of crisis counselors like we have here ready to go in,” Hadi said. “They are essentially a big group of people unrelated to each other who have been crammed together now for days without adequate support and infrastructure. We unfortunately have enough experience in Florida that we plan far ahead.”

The Red Cross is doing all it can, said Pepe. In addition to the licensed mental health professionals that are part of the Red Cross network, the aid organization is also recruiting counselors from airlines and other businesses who have large numbers of crisis counselors on staff or as consultants.

In the meantime, Red Cross staff and volunteers are trying to stress their safety rules to those seeking shelter. No firearms, alcohol or drugs are allowed in shelters, children must be with their parents at all times, cots should be arranged so that family units are as close together as possible, and women and children should always shower and use toilet facilities as family groups.

Nancy Cook Lauer is a journalist in Tallahassee, Fla.

For more information:

Louisiana Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness <http://www.ohsep.louisiana.gov/>

Copyright © 2005 Women's eNews.