

Holly Kerr
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OPINION

By Holly Kerr

The ‘Peacekeepers’ Overlook Peace on Their Own Turf

While the US Government have been busy pumping money into war, weapons and security to ‘bring peace to the world’ it appears that they have overlooked some major problems on their own soil. Hurricane Katrina has been a reality check for them and President Bush has been noble enough to accept full responsibility for failures in his Government’s response to the situation in New Orleans.¹ The apology however, does not change the fact that thousands of New Orleans residents were without food, water and shelter, and violence and looting was breaking out throughout the ruined city days after the Hurricane occurred.

The very poor emergency response plan implemented can be largely to blame for the severe violence and deaths that have occurred in New Orleans. It is outrageous that in a developed country that prides itself on being innovative and financially secure, more than 15,000 people have to find refuge in a hot and stinking Superdome without food, water and sanitation for a number of days. This situation

¹ Mr Bush said, “the Hurricane exposed serious problems in our response capabilities at all levels of Government. To the extent that the Federal Government didn’t fully do it’s job right.” (Illawarra Mercury, Thursday 15 September 2005, p5)

resembles something more like a third world country than what you would expect in the United States. By definition a disaster disrupts the flow of social relations for some period of time and many members of a social system fail to receive expected conditions of life from the system.² However, it was the length of time taken by the Government and emergency services to respond to the situation that was detrimental to the residents of New Orleans.³

As the days passed by, people became more desperate - Desperate for food, desperate for shelter, desperate to get out of 'hell'. This desperation consequently resulted in acts of violence. The lack of authority within New Orleans allowed the violence to continue. Psychologists acknowledge the prevalence of violence during and after times of crisis as acts of desperation and a means of distracting the situation

² Perry, 1982, p30-31.

³ According to Perry, the nature of stress on social systems after the occurrence of a disaster is dependent on four basic dimensions: the scope of the impact, the speed of onset, the duration of impact and social preparedness. (1982, p31) The scope of impact refers to the scale in terms of geography that the disaster affected. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, the scope of impact was enormous, affecting an entire city. The speed of impact implies how fast the disaster occurred between the time of warning and occurrence. Residents of New Orleans were warned to evacuate the city on 28 August before the storm hit, however no provisions were put in place for the large numbers and those citizens unable to evacuate themselves. Evacuation was mainly left up to individuals to find their own way out of the city. The fact that over 120,000 people in New Orleans (approx 27% of all residents) do not own cars (Wikipedia Encyclopedia,

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_government_response_to_Hurricane_Katrina, accessed 20/9/05) make it quite difficult for citizens to make a hasty evacuation

The duration of the impact refers to the length of time taken from occurrence of disaster to the return of normal social life. The duration of Hurricane Katrina is going to be a lengthy one, with many residents still trapped in their homes and unable to vacate the ruined city. The fortunate who have been evacuated have become refugees and are not likely to be returning to their normal routines for a long time.

Finally, social preparedness is used in the context of the possibility of forewarnings allowable through technology to permit us to anticipate or predict a threatened disaster impact. There were many predictions of hurricane risk in New Orleans before the strike of Hurricane Katrina. The city lies under sea level, and its levee system was designed for hurricanes no more intense than category 3. The Corps of Engineers, along with the Louisiana Water Resources Research Institute at Louisiana State University and the authorities in Jefferson Parish investigated the effects of a category 5 hurricane on New Orleans back in 2001. They concluded that city was not prepared for such a disaster and infrastructure would need to be put in place to deal with such an occurrence. Despite the extensive research undertaken and proposals made to fix the situation, funding still has not been provided by the Government. (Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_preparedness_for_New_Orleans, accessed 20/9/05)

at hand.⁴ However, the violence cannot be entirely warranted to as a means of distraction. Obviously violence is something that is a regular part of these people's lives, because in a time of crisis your average Aussie would be lending a helping hand to overcome their losses, not literally stabbing others in the back. Since when did rape become acceptable as a means of passing time? It is obvious that the culture within New Orleans is somewhat different to the one we are familiar with, where people band together not turn against one another.

Perhaps the fact that New Orleans is one of America's poorer cities, with more than 25 per cent of residents and 40 per cent of children living at or below the poverty line⁵ has something to do with the outbreak of violence. There is documented evidence that shows a clear link between low socio-economic status and violence,⁶ so the desperation of residents cannot be solely to blame. Race also comes into play, with two-thirds of New Orleans residents African American. The disparity between black and white within the American culture can create hostility when the majority of the Government are white and they are perceived to be providing inadequate support for a city comprised of mostly African American's. The slow and lacklustre response by the Government can be viewed by residents as an act of racism, whereby repressed negative feelings for the 'white' government can become exposed when they feel they

⁴ Dr Volkan's collective theory of violence begins with a chosen trauma, such as the situation in New Orleans. Rather than facing the anguish of mourning for their losses, individuals can find distraction in self-righteous hostility and aggression towards others. This regression builds up, becoming collective regression and views violence as the only alternative. (Cited by Scheff, 2004, p1)

⁵ Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_government_response_to_Hurricane_Katrina, accessed 20/09/05)

⁶ Allen, Cited by Leetha, 2001, p47. Barak proposes the theory of underclass violence whereby those deprived of the basic opportunities and necessities of life, such as education and adequate clothing and shelter, are placed at greater risk for forms of violence than any other group in society. (2003, p126) Residents of New Orleans fall into the growing category of poor, single-parent families that reside in ghettos and barrios. Barak recognises that "girls and women of the underclass experience more victimisation than any other societal group. In the case of mothers, the victimisation may come in the form of physical or sexual abuse from their lovers or ex-spouses; in the case of daughters, it may come from parents – present or absent – boyfriends, acquaintances or strangers." (2003, p127) As violence becomes an everyday part of these underclass females lives, they too are likely to become more negative and abusive towards others.

are being treated unfairly.⁷ These repressed feelings, along with the heightened situation can both be regarded as factors contributing to the violence in New Orleans.

Race, low socio-economic status, desperation and most of all the slow Government response, all played a part in the violence that occurred in New Orleans. Perhaps if the US government weren't so consumed with the War in Iraq and trying to bring 'peace' to Iraqi civilians, they could have provided the adequate support that was needed in their own country. It is a fact that National Guard units are short staffed in Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama because they are currently on a tour of duty in Iraq, including 3,000 members of the Louisiana National Guard's 256th Brigade.⁸ If the government diverted less personnel, equipment, funding and other resources to the War in Iraq, they would have been able to sufficiently respond to the crisis in New Orleans and prevent much of the violence occurring. It is about time George Bush wakes up to himself and stops trying to bring peace to the rest of the world and instead focuses on greater issues in his own country.

⁷ Rev. Jesse Jackson stated, "many black people feel that their race, their property conditions and their voting patterns have been a factor in the response." (cited by Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_government_response_to_Hurricane_Katrina, accessed 20/09/05)

⁸ Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_government_response_to_Hurricane_Katrina, accessed 20/09/05)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A Few Bombs Short

The US Government have wasted far too much of tax payers money on the War in Iraq instead of investing it where needed – in their own country. The US Army Corps of Engineers submitted a proposal to congress in October 2004 requesting four million dollars to fund a preliminary study into making the levee system in New Orleans capable of withstanding a category four plus hurricane. Funnily enough the congress rejected it citing budgetary concerns resulting from the Iraq War.⁹ The costs of the damage of Hurricane Katrina will most likely be on par with what a levee system would have cost, so where is the government going to get the money from now? Obviously they will be a few bombs short next month. Jeff Wilson, Rushcutters Bay

Desperate Times Call For Desperate Measures

It is fair enough to say that the violence could have been prevented after Hurricane Katrina if help had of arrived sooner, but in what lifetime is rape an act that the government be held responsible for? I can understand the argument that people become desperate in a time of crisis, but surely sex (especially with young children) would be the last thing on your mind after you have just lost everything.¹⁰ What kind of sick and perverted world are we living in?¹¹ Melanie Pope, Hornsby

⁹ Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_preparedness_for_New_Orleans, accessed 20/09/05

¹⁰ Nicholas Groth recognises that “rape is not primarily the aggressive expression of sexuality but rather the sexual expression of aggression. It is a pseudosexual act prompted more by retaliatory and compensatory motives than by sexual ones. It is complex and multidetermined, but involves issues of control and hostility more than those of passion and desire. The rapist is not assaulting because he is sexually frustrated or deprived, any more than the alcoholic is drinking because he is thirsty.” (Cited by Barak, 2003, p68) According to this theory, the prevalence of rape within New Orleans can be regarded

On the Path of Destruction

It is true that much of the violence could have been eliminated if there were a faster response by emergency services and a larger degree of law enforcement. However I believe that the reality of the situation comes down to the theory of informal social control and cumulative disadvantage.¹² The residents on New Orleans have grown up on a pathway of antisocial behaviour. The effects of Hurricane Katrina just heightened the situation and caused these already existing violent behaviours to become exposed. Instead of blaming the Government for the violence, maybe we should be blaming the Government for allowing violence to be a common part of American life. The lax gun laws are probably a good place to start with the accusations.

Paul Battersby, Wollongong

as a form of aggression that was expressed in frustration of the situation and not merely a desperate need for sexual pleasure.

¹¹ According to the findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey, not only have 52% of women surveyed reported having been physically assaulted in some time in their lives, 54% have reported having experienced a completed or attempted rape, usually before their eighteenth birthday. The prevalence of reported rape varied significantly among women of different racial and ethnic backgrounds and most acts usually involved partners as opposed to strangers.

¹² Sampson and Laub developed this theory to propose the idea that anti-social behaviour is built upon three related themes or arguments. Firstly, structural factors or conditions such as poverty or racism affect the development of social bonds. Secondly, a combination of social conditions and labelling processes can lead to cumulative disadvantage and the stability of antisocial behaviour across the lifespan. The people living in New Orleans have grown up with hardships and it is the cumulation of disadvantage that has heightened the degree of violence after the Hurricane. The conditions that these people were already living in had an impact on their development of social bonds from a young age. This reflects on the ascending into a pathway of antisocial behaviour across their lifespan. (Barak, 2003, p152)

COMMENTARY

Discussions between George Stanley, Editor of *The Australian*, and Holly Kerr before she wrote the opinion piece on the violence that occurred in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

GS: Why do you want to write about violence and Hurricane Katrina?

HK: When I first read some of the stories in the newspaper about the shootings, the looting and the rapes occurring in New Orleans after the hurricane, I was appalled. I thought how can a city in such a crisis turn against one another like that. It interests me to find out the reasoning why people would add to the disaster of the situation by hurting others. Despite the fact that there has never been a disaster of that altitude in Australia during my lifetime, I cannot imagine that Australians would respond in the same way. I want to investigate the disparity in cultural differences in response to crisis. I also want to find out the reasons behind the slow response by the Government and emergency services and whether this was a main contributor the prevalence of violence.

GS: And where do you plan on sourcing your information from?

Firstly I'm going to gather as many news articles on the situation as I can. I will collect these from a variety of newspapers and also from the Internet. I will read these to gage an accurate picture of the situation. I will then get books from the library on the theories of human aggression and principles of emergency planning. I will also source this information from journal articles and the Internet. These will help me to learn about the reasoning behind the violence and also the processes that are required

to be implemented in a time of crises. I will rely on these sources to bring out the disparities between cultures that attribute to acts of violence.

I also intend on interviewing a few people to analyse other view points on what they deem factors contributing to the violence and whether the violence was inevitable or could have been avoided. Through these interviews I will broaden my sources to base my work on and also gauge whether my opinion piece will gain public support and interest.

GS: Very well, you sound like you are on the right track. I will look forward to reading the finished piece.

Discussions between George Stanley and Holly Kerr after she submits her opinion piece to him for approval.

GS: I'm impressed, however a little concerned that the reiteration of US Government negligence may cause some discontent.

HK: I did try to be a careful with how I went about this, but the fact that George Bush has admitted blame for the slow response by the Government is a big factor. In all my research I came across hundreds of news stories and opinion pieces blaming the US government for many aspects of the situation. I even found a poll on the public response of the governments handling of the situation on Wikipedia, a credible electronic encyclopedia. A large percentage of those surveyed blame the state and government officials for the extent of damage and lack of prevention. This was just one of the many sources that are blaming the government, so I don't think that the Australian public will be offended by my negativity towards the US government.

GS: Who did you interview and did you find this method useful?

I interviewed my parents, two work colleagues and a friend. I did find this useful, because it gave me a broader perspective of the situation and allowed me to investigate aspects of the situation that I hadn't already thought of. Despite the fact that I looked at numerous sources of information, talking to others about it made me think about the situation harder and analyse it from a variety of angles. It also reiterated my own thoughts, with many of our thoughts and ideas converging.

GS: What challenges did you come across during your research?

HK: The most challenging part was not actually finding much information or theories on violence as a result of crisis. There was a lot of information about post-traumatic stress and various other theories of violence but not much specifically related to crisis. The other challenging aspect was actually sorting through the vast amount of information on Hurricane Katrina and determining the credibility of much of it.

GS: What have you learned from researching the topic?

An interesting thing that I did learn is that sexual violence, or rape, is not merely an act of sexual desire but a form of aggression. When I heard about the rapes occurring in New Orleans I thought how could people be thinking about their sexual needs at such a time of crisis and how sick are these people to have to resort to taking it out on children. I then discovered that sexual abuse is a way of releasing aggression, not attending to sexual desires.

GS: Very interesting. Anything else?

HK: I learnt that a proposal had been made to US congress to upgrade the levee system in New Orleans. The government rejected this due to budgetary constraints stemming from the War in Iraq. If only the levee system was build, many lives and property would have been saved. This angered me, because clearly there are greater

issues in America surrounding violence, yet all George Bush seems to be concerned about is funding a war to create peace – it's ironic really.

GS: What action would you like to see if your editorial is published?

HK: Basically I just want to make people more aware of the greater issues surrounding Hurricane Katrina. I want them to see the inadequacies of the US government and also gain an understanding of where the violence stems from.

GS: Do you think that your editorial could change anything or make a difference?

HK: The only real thing that I can see is a change in people's perspective and a greater understanding of the situation. Obviously my opinion, among many others is not going to change the situation in New Orleans or America for that matter. I do believe however that it can excerpt greater awareness among the general public in Australia. I can see it generating feedback via letters to *The Australian* and general discussion in the workplace, at home and over lunch.

GS: Well I look forward to receiving letters in response next week after it's published.

Well done Holly.

INTERVIEWS

HK: The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina has involved a large degree of violence, what do you think has been a large contributor to this?

AK: The inadequate support and the time frame for how long it has taken for people to get assistance.

JK: Lack of amenities and facilities and coordination of getting the situation under control.

OR: The Government not acting on it quick enough. Also because it's such a poor area where violence is already an everyday part of their lives.

TF: Selfishness by the residents and a total disregard for others welfare. There was also an element of opportunism where there was a lack of control by authorities, so people exploited this through doing bad things such as looting and acts of violence.

MH: The slow response by the Government for relief to the residents.

HK: Do you think violence could have been avoided?

AK: Yes, if there were a better emergency back-up plan. People were warned to get out, but didn't, so perhaps if they had of then many lives would have been saved and the violence would not have reached the extent that it did.

JK: I don't really, because I think with the extent of the damage and the panic that was caused there was bound to be the most adverse reactions. There was also a lack of organisation and preparation by the residents. Too, the fact that the people were in a low socio-economic area that struggle to survive anyway, violence is already a common part of their lives.

OR: Definitely, if help got there quicker.

TF: Yes, if the large group of people hadn't been left in the situation for the period of time that they had.

MH: Some of it could of, but there is always going to be some due to the low socio-economic area. If the aid was there for them, then it wouldn't have been as prevalent.

HK: Do you think that if the hurricane occurred in Australia the violence would have still occurred?

AK: No, because we have better emergency response plans in place in Australia. Gun laws in Australia are a lot tighter than US laws, which too prevents violence.

JK: To an extent yes, because a lot of it resulted from panic. However, Australians tend to band together in a time of crisis as opposed to Americans who seem to be more one for one. They're used to making their own ends meet and use their own

survival skills without help. Our government has a lot of plans in place especially in disaster situations that would prevent the degree of violence that has occurred in New Orleans.

OR: NO. The poor area has a lot to do with it. Even if it happened in Redfern it wouldn't have been to that degree. The low socio-economic status of the residents is a big factor.

TF: Yes, people aren't any different anywhere in the world regardless of personality.

MH: there probably would have been some violence, but Australians are pretty helpful to each other in times of crisis.

HK: But it's America, aren't they supposed to be leading the way in peace keeping? Do you think they are too consumed worrying about other countries that they are neglecting what is happening in their own country?

AK: Instead of sinking money into war, they could have been sinking infrastructure into preventing the flooding in New Orleans. Engineers designed a wall that would have prevented this disaster, but it never got built. Too much money has been spent on War and weapons and security – but not the security of a whole city from being wiped out.

JK: Definitely, for example the street violence prevalent in the US and liberal gun laws just show the extent of the problems that are being overlooked. Also, it's evident that the US hasn't got enough funding to help their own in a time of crisis with the consequences clearly shown now two weeks later when people in New Orleans are still crying out for help.

OR: They want to publicise that they're so big and tough, but they need to look in their own backyard first.

TF: They put on the appearance of being peace makers but I think they are far from that. If your policies or your culture doesn't suit their agenda then watch out.

MH: Yes I agree. It's in the media all the time what they're doing in other countries, but we don't really hear about what they're doing in their own country because it's not in the media until something like this happens and it highlights their inadequacies. We haven't heard any good stories arise from the hurricane about heroes saving lives, we have only heard about the bad things.

HK: Do you think the violence was linked to racial disparities, or were an act of desperation?

AK: Hard to answer when you're not there, but the 85% black population does say something. The lack of forward emergency planning and education of the residents was a major contribution to the outbreak of violence. The fact that help took so long to get to people made people more desperate. When people are starving and thirsty, they act desperately and turn against one another.

JK: An act of desperation mostly – the poor and struggling will do whatever they can.

OR: I think it does have something to do with it. The large black population may have something to do with it.

TF: Desperation.

MH: There were probably incidents that occurred before the hurricane but the severity of the situation heightened the violence.

HK: Australians that were trapped in the Superdome for a number of days have come back and reported on the horrific situation where people were raped and killed. Do you think these were acts of desperation, or something that occurs everyday but doesn't make the media headlines?

AK: Its probably acts of desperations, but also an insight into the everyday life in New Orleans. Their law and order are not up to the standards here in Australia; Their policing policies are not as stringent as ours.

JK: Its just the society that exists over there. Before that happened in the Superdome, Australian tourists probably already experienced that over there walking down the street. It was probably just heightened with the situation.

OR: It prob does occur everyday, if they are that gutsy to do in an enclosed area. Why would they suddenly start attacking kids?

TF: I think the desperate situation exacerbated the situation. Those things do occur everyday, but it was obviously more intense. The media focus made it heavily publicised.

MH: They probably happen everyday, but because everyone was in the one area and there was so much media coverage surrounding the situation we found out about it. I can understand that there may be fighting due to the frustration of individuals, but rape under any circumstances is unacceptable.