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THE POST-DISASTER STRUGGLE FOR EQUITY AND JUSTICE IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR ALONG THE GULF COAST

Dr. Beverly Wright

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina landed a devastating blow to the Gulf Coast, but it was the steady stream of stark televised images of desperate and seemingly abandoned residents that flowed through the media that began to shatter many of the illusions held by our society. Most Americans believed that the government would always be there as an effective safety net for everyone in times of catastrophic disaster. They also held the belief that natural disasters were random occurrences that plagued all communities in one way or another. As the government emergency rescue and recovery efforts failed particularly in New Orleans, the world began to realize that this was not the case. The impact of this disaster was not random at all, but systematic in its effects. It was a largely African American and often poor population that lived in the areas most vulnerable to the collapse of the levees that was unable to secure transportation for evacuation, and who scrambled in frightening conditions to secure scarce resources and aid for themselves, their families, friends and neighbors.

Minority and low-income Americans are more likely to be underserved by government and private relief agencies before, during and after environmental calamities. Before a disaster, minorities are more likely to be underprepared and underserved in addition to be living in unsafe, substandard housing. During a disaster, minorities and the poor, due to economic and language barriers, are often less exposed to disaster warnings, and are more likely to encounter ethnic insensitivity (conscious or unconscious) at the hands of relief workers and government officials. After a disaster, minorities and low-income individuals suffer slow recoveries, not only because they have less insurance and lower incomes, but also because they receive less information, fewer loans, and less government relief. Additionally, they encounter bias in the search for long-term housing.

As if to drive home the point that the discriminatory outcomes following Hurricane Katrina were not an anomaly, but the result of systemic, even institutionalized racism, the Gulf Coast was struck once again with a disaster of epic proportions. On the heels of the recovery from Katrina, Gulf Coast residents were literally blown away by the

size and extent of the British Petroleum (BP) Deep Water Horizon Oil Disaster. Examination of the response to this oil spill suggests that race plays a major role in outcomes following an environmental disaster.

The massive BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster created an environmental nightmare on the Gulf Coast. The oil disaster killed 11 workers. Government officials estimate the ruptured well leaked nearly 200 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, surpassing the record-setting, 140 million gallon Ixtoc oil spill off Mexico's coast from 1979 to 1980. The spill contaminated 120 miles of U.S. coastline, imperiled multibillion fishing and tourism industries and killed birds, sea turtles and dolphins. The full health, environmental, and economic impact of this catastrophe may not become clear for decades. While the media spotlight has focused attention on efforts at stopping the massive oil leak and cleaning up the spill, the same level of attention has not been given to where the oil-spill clean-up waste is eventually dumped. Not much attention has been given to which communities were selected as the final resting place for BP's oil-spill garbage.

Four of the nine approved landfills that had received BP waste as of July 15, 2010 were located in communities of color. And according to the EPA preliminary figures, of the nearly 40,000 tons of BP waste disposed at the nine landfills, over 55 percent landed in communities of color in Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, and Louisiana. The largest amount of BP oil-spill solid waste (14,228 tons) has been sent to a landfill in a Florida community where three quarters of the nearby residents are people of color. While African American communities in Louisiana's Gulf Coast were hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina, experiencing the toughest challenge to rebuild and recover after five years; they are now literally being dumped on again with oil spill wastes.

As reconstruction, rebuilding and oil spill cleanup continue to move forward in New Orleans and the Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama Gulf coastal regions, it is clear that government's response to each of these disasters leaves much to be desired. The lethargic and inept emergency response after Hurricane Katrina was a disaster that overshadowed the deadly storm itself. Now, five years after the storm, government's response to the BP oil disaster has not changed the landscape of equality and justice when it comes to environmental disasters. In addition to the onslaught of wastes and adverse health effects resulting from the exposure and clean up, it just might be a "policy surge," not a storm surge or an oil spill that will complete the job.

Real examples of the perilous consequences of policy decisions are already being experienced in New Orleans and along the Gulf

Coast. Communities least affected by the storm and the impacts of the disposal of oil spill wastes tend to have a larger percentage of white residents. These communities are also more likely to describe the recovery and cleanup as satisfactory. Areas slated for immediate reoccupation and redevelopment after Katrina and receiving a large percentage of hazardous mitigation funds as well as an increased level of levee protection are predominantly white areas in a city that was approximately 65% African American. Communities slated for disposal of BP oil spill wastes are also predominantly African-American and the only community that successfully prevented oil spill wastes from being deposited in its backyard was a majority white community. An examination of how these disparities occurred all pointed to administrative policies that favored more affluent and white residents of these cities.

If policies are not developed to protect vulnerable populations, there will be a permanent and systematic depopulation and displacement of African-American, other minorities and the poor in communities of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Extraordinary efforts must be taken by leaders and allies to effectively ensure the inclusion of environmental, public health, and social equity in the New Orleans and Gulf Coast restoration process.
