

Aerial view of prisoners on the Overpass



PHOTOGRAPH: AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTO

X. CONCLUSION

Until now, the story of the prisoners at Orleans Parish Prison has received short shrift. Like many of the stories that came out of Katrina, theirs is one of survival. With few exceptions, the prisoners held in OPP in the wake of Hurricane Katrina took care of one another. They worked to free fellow prisoners trapped in cells filled with contaminated floodwaters, watched out for the frail and sick, as well as for juveniles too small to stand in the water without help. Without food, water, light, or ventilation for days, the response of the prisoners to chaotic, terrifying conditions was remarkable.

Many of the stories are also about racially motivated animosity on the part of prison officials, while all of the stories are about the blatant disregard for the dignity that was owed to each man, woman, and child trapped in OPP during and after the storm.

The stories in this report are not, however, simply about survival. Rather, they are stories of a criminal justice system that has had serious problems for a very long time. The abuse of prisoners at OPP and the inattention paid to their basic needs existed long before Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. Likewise, the damage caused by the storm only revealed how infirm Louisiana's indigent defense system already was.

It is important that these stories are told, so that they are not forgotten. It is also important so that the mistakes chronicled in this report are never repeated. By instituting the recommendations at the beginning of this report, local, state and federal officials can begin the process of bringing justice to the OPP evacuees, while taking steps to ensure real public safety by making OPP a safer, more humane, and more cost-effective jail.