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Decaying Bodies Abound in Low-Lying St. Bernard (Update2)

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By Victor Epstein

Sept. 7 (Bloomberg) -- The 60 residents of St. Rita's Nursing Home had a plan to evacuate before Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. Instead, the staff and patients remained as the storm flooded the low-lying parish of St. Bernard.

Because of that decision, the bodies of at least 15 residents, and possibly as many as 35, are now decomposing inside the one-story facility in this area about six miles east of downtown where 67,000 people once lived.

The body of one elderly woman, clothed in a thin housedress, legs spread wide, sits on the concrete floor of the front patio. A two-foot-high statue of the Virgin Mary still stands in the lobby, facing outward. Nearby, the thin, bony body of an elderly man is draped over the back of a chair, where the receding waters left it. Outside, debris covers the roof of a Hummer sport utility vehicle, which local officials say belongs to a staffer.

``When we saw that Hummer still in the parking lot a few days ago, we knew we were in trouble because that's the first vehicle they would have used to escape," Parish Councilman Tony Ricky Melerine said yesterday afternoon.

Officials of St. Bernard Parish, a bedroom and retirement community bounded by water on three sides, say their death toll may reach 500. They blame the lawlessness of the inner city for diverting resources and attention from them.

The shortage of manpower and impassability of roads prevented local residents from getting inside St. Rita's until yesterday, nine days after Katrina.

Doing the Count

``It doesn't look like anyone has been here yet to make a count," Melerine said as he poled a skiff over the black muck of St. Bernard's flooded streets. ``This was my district. We gonna have to do it."

The nursing home's dark interior is worse than any horror movie: it's real and it's accompanied by the sweet tangy smell of rotting human flesh. The odor clings to clothing and to the inside of the mouths of the living.

The signature of the brown high-water mark reaches a foot shy of the ceiling inside the football-field-size structure of St. Rita's. Six inches of sewage, mud and putrefied tissue coat the floor in a slippery dark brown scum strewn with broken furniture, bodies and wheelchairs.

``This is the worst thing I've ever seen and I drug bodies to the levee after Hurricane Betsy," said 60-year-old Raymond Couture. He and Melerine chopped their way out of the councilman's attic with axes at the height of the storm. They've been working 20-hour days since.

Other Horrors

The horror at St. Rita's may be repeated elsewhere in St. Bernard Parish. The community's four other large nursing homes and assisted-living facilities followed their parish evacuation plan. Still, it's unclear how many smaller centers were emptied.

Parish firefighters say the communities of Delacroix and Yscloskey are completely gone. They were located outside the protective levees and may be nothing more than prefixes in the Greater New Orleans telephone book today: 265, 267, 676 and 684.

St. Bernard must also contend with a 250,000-gallon fuel spill at the Murphy Oil USA Inc. refinery. The community's three refineries provide 15 percent of the nation's gasoline, according to Parish President Henry ``Junior" Rodriguez.

Only five of the sheriff's 75 squad cars are still running and every member of the Parish Council is homeless, he said.

``We have collected more than 80 bodies and we still haven't reached the worst part of the parish," Rodriguez said yesterday from an emergency operations center inside an Exxon Mobil refinery. ``There's not a home left here that's livable. There may be 25 homes out of 25,000 that are intact."

Recorded Deaths

Fatalities throughout New Orleans will reach thousands, officials predict. Louisiana recorded 83 dead so far, said Bob Johannessen, a spokesman for the state's Health and Hospitals Department. Last night, Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour estimated the state's death toll at 196.

Cows, horses and dogs wander the streets of St. Bernard Parish, limping between ruined cars and boats. Every home and business bears some scar from Katrina. Splintered telephone poles lean drunkenly across streets or hang in the air, suspended from tangled wires.

``We have a lot of elderly residents who moved here because there's so little crime," said Rodriguez. ``They came because it was so safe."

Unlike in downtown, there was no looting or gunfire reported in St. Bernard Parish. There was just a relentless surge of water that poured over levees, pushing the parish's populace up into their attics and onto their roofs.

More Fury

Survivors say nature unleashed more fury on this community than any other parish in the area.

``It was worse in St. Bernard than in New Orleans," said Parish firefighter Daren Schaeffer, 41. ``We had 20 feet of water in some places."

Parish officials said the Federal Emergency Management Agency did not show up until Sept. 5, a week after the storm. Yesterday, FEMA approved \$31 million in immediate aid and dropped off a mobile command center for the parish government.

Members of a FEMA disaster mortuary response team are expected to begin working in the parish today. National Guard troops are scarcer in St. Bernard than in New Orleans's central business district, where truckloads of troops still hunt looters.

``We're glad FEMA finally showed up, but for the first five days after the storm, no one even came looking to see how we were doing," said Parish Councilwoman Judy Hoffmeister. ``Now, they say they're going to give us everything we need, but we were in desperate need of it days and days ago."

Water Power

Generators from the Department of Homeland Security were delivered yesterday to power St. Bernard's water plant, Parish President Rodriguez said on the parish's Web site. He said the water level fell another 6 inches yesterday and that five of eight pumps in the area were working.

The hallways inside the emergency operations center are lined with cases of bottled water and military rations. Offices have been turned into temporary barracks for parish employees. There is electricity from emergency generators, but there is no running water, which means toilets and air conditioners won't work.

Bedraggled dogs at the end of makeshift tethers cower under pickup trucks outside. Four of them sat with exhausted firefighters yesterday at the main firehouse across the street. Elsewhere in the parish, packs of feral dogs are being shot.

``Most of the animals are dead," said Rodriguez. ``The dogs have not eaten and they're starting to

get to the bodies. We had a pack of four pit bulls kill a horse."

Hall of Nightmares

Each closed door inside St. Rita's darkened hallways is a nightmare. Some are blocked by tangled heaps of furniture and bodies. The body count is cursory, a blackened hand sticking out from between a gurney and collapsed wall being tallied as one person. The searchers are fearful of falling into the muck, whose composition is not in doubt.

Fifteen bodies are counted inside the building with many more suspected of being there or of having floated outside. Some doors wedged shut with debris could not be opened at all.

The staff at St. Rita's managed to save 20 patients by floating them on mattresses across a half-mile of floodwater to nearby Beauregard High School as the water level rose, Couture, one of the rescuers, said.

One died on the way, two died there, and a fourth died afterward in the hospital, he said. Those deaths pushed the confirmed body count to 19. There were 65 patients inside when the storm hit and at least six staffers.

``The water level rose from the ground to eight feet in 15 minutes, and it did that all over the parish," said Melerine, the parish councilman.

Call to Owner

Parish officials called the owner of St. Rita's before the storm to ask her why she hadn't evacuated patients, said Dr. Paul Verrette, medical director for the St. Bernard Office of Emergency Preparedness.

``We have pleaded with those people for years to execute their evacuation plan," Verrette said. ``They never do."

St. Bernard Coroner Bryan Bertucci said he called nursing home owner Mabel Mangano during a Parish Council meeting at 2 p.m. on Aug. 28, a day before the storm. He said he asked her why she had not followed the evacuation plan she filed with the parish and removed her patients to Baton Rouge and Lafayette on the two buses set aside for them.

``She told me she had a generator and five nurses and had gotten the permission of the patients' families to stay put," Bertucci said. Then she asked me if I thought the council would be mad at her."

Mangano could not be reached for comment. Her whereabouts and safety are unknown.

``This is beyond the council now," Rodriguez, the parish president, said. ``I suspect that she'll wish she had left by the time this is done, if she doesn't already."

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