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Cover Story
A Tale of Two Storms
Myanmar (Burma) and New Orleans
The African World
By Bill Fletcher, Jr.

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Sometimes you hear things that are so unbelievable that you wonder whether it was all in your imagination. That is precisely the way that i felt in listening to comments by the Bush administration on the disastrous cyclone that hit the south Asian nation of Myanmar (Burma).

Don't get me wrong. I am no fan of the military junta that runs Myanmar (Burma) and has both repressed its people and served the multinational corporations. I am sickened by their anemic approach in responding to the disaster, one in which it is now estimated that at least 127,000 people may be dead. Yet in listening to the Bush administration and their rants against the Myanmar (Burma) junta's approach to the disaster one could get the impression that there had never been something called the Hurricane Katrina disaster.

Consider, for just a moment, the Bush rhetoric; in fact, just consider one piece of it. President Bush criticizes the Myanmar (Burma) junta for its failure to allow into the country foreign aid workers to help with disaster recovery. While this criticism appears to be absolutely correct, it ignores an interesting fact: in the aftermath of the Katrina disaster the governments of both Cuba and Venezuela offered badly needed assistance. The Bush administration, under those circumstances, either ignored the offers or turned them down. In fact, the Cuban government had experienced personnel on standby prepared to fly to the Gulf Coast (note: Cuba has a great deal of experience with hurricanes).

What is striking here is not only the hypocrisy of the Bush administration but that few commentators have even noticed. A global chorus of outrage has been expressed with the Myanmar (Burma) junta, but a significant silence surrounds any comparison with the failures of the Bush administration's approach in the Katrina disaster.

It is worth raising this, not to simply put our fingers in the face of the Administration, but to remind ourselves and all those of conscience, that despite the fact that it was not 127,000 that died as a result of Katrina, the deaths and displacement on the US Gulf Coast were just as political as are the deaths in Myanmar (Burma). Obviously there are natural disasters: a cyclone did hit Myanmar (Burma). The number of dead and displaced, however, relates to all sorts of factors including the manner in which the land is used; the nature and amount of well constructed housing; the ability to warn the population in advance of the disaster; and the infrastructure that exists to address recovery. Cuba, which is far from being a rich country, has a very sophisticated approach to preparing its people in the face of predictable natural disasters, in their case hurricanes. Hurricanes, for the Gulf Coast of the USA, and cyclones, for South Asia, are not unusual. How governments choose to prepare for them and respond to them is directly related to their political and economic systems.

In the case of Katrina, the economic policies over the years have drained the public sector of the resources that are needed for disaster response. In the case of New Orleans, as we now know (and as experts AND the people of New Orleans knew then) the levees were not in any shape to withstand a major storm. Coupled with this was the Bush administration's own incompetent response to the disaster, betraying a class and racial bias against the people who were the principal victims of the storm. The refusal to accept outside assistance from Cuba and Venezuela simply added salt to the open wound.

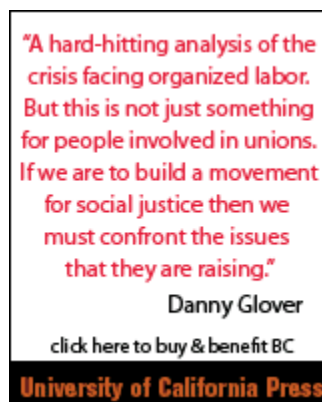
The Bush administration's hypocritical rhetoric should remind us that the Katrina wound has not been healed. The Bush administration has learned nothing from the disaster except how to take advantage of it to advance its pro-privatization agenda for economic development, along with the ability to change the demographics of New Orleans in order to make it more likely that the Republican Party can gain ground. In that sense i see very little difference in the response of the Myanmar (Burma) junta and the Bush administration to disasters in which thousands of innocent victims have perished or been displaced.

If the Katrina 'wound' has not been healed, then there is an obvious question: what needs to be done? Gulf Coast-based organizations (and some national allies) continue to push for the right of return for the evacuees and for a pro-people development strategy, but Katrina is no longer on the national radar screen. Yet Katrina, much like the Myanmar (Burma) cyclone, points out the corruption of the dominant political forces. It should remain a rallying cry for Black progressives and our allies in challenging the economic priorities of the USA. Just as the Myanmar (Burma) cyclone disaster must be met with more than material aid and relief, so too should our own Gulf Coast. The respective disasters, being tied directly to bankrupt economic policies and political establishments, need to be challenged as political and economic disasters. This means that the continuing problems faced by the Gulf Coast and its residents (present and evacuees) as a result of the Katrina disaster must be

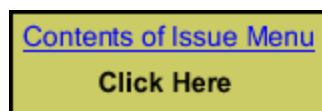
challenged by a mobilization for political power on the part of those who have been disenfranchised (especially, but not exclusively, African Americans) and a demand for fundamentally different economic priorities.

When the [Black Radical Congress](http://blackradicalcongress.org) (blackradicalcongress.org) convenes in St. Louis [June 20-22], they, along with other Black activists around the country need to consider our collective failure to respond en masse to the Katrina disaster and the implications for what should now take place. My guess is that there are activists across Myanmar (Burma) who are grappling with similar issues and pondering how they can challenge those who turned a natural disaster into a political, economic and humanitarian catastrophe.

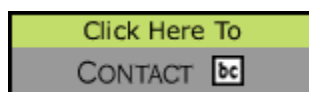
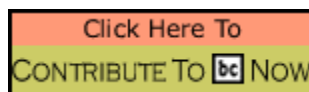
We probably have much to learn from one another.



BlackCommentator.com Executive Editor, Bill Fletcher, Jr., is a Senior Scholar with the [Institute for Policy Studies](#), the immediate past president of [TransAfrica Forum](#) and the co-author of the **just released** book, [Solidarity Divided](#) (University of California Press), which examines the crisis of organized labor in the USA. [Click here](#) to contact Mr. Fletcher.



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