

Open Letter regarding MDG Summit and US obligations in the wake of Hurricane Katrina

September 9, 2005

Dr. Condoleezza Rice
Secretary U. S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW Washington, DC

Dear Dr. Rice,

The Habitat International Coalition (HIC) is the leading global network of more than 400 social movements, research centers, advocacy groups, and nongovernmental organizations working for housing and land rights for the world's people.

HIC's General Assembly, including representatives from 38 countries from five continents meeting this week in Cairo, urges the US government to abide by its treaty obligations and other relevant principles of international law, detailed below.

We also urge you to change course in the upcoming UN Global Summit meeting in New York City, in the wake of the destruction of New Orleans and the related ongoing destruction of Iraq.

First, let us express HIC's profound solidarity with the people in the US South in their current ordeal. The horrific images from the Gulf Coast have awakened heartfelt sympathy and offers of help from governments and people from all walks of life, as occurred in the immediate aftermath of September 11.

We urge you to accept these offers of help to provide urgent, life-saving assistance to the victims of this disaster, in accordance with the UN's Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

At the same time, we are amazed that the government of the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth has been so unprepared and unresponsive to the needs of its own people, particularly those who are Black, vulnerable and poor.

Despite \$40 billion spent annually on 'homeland security', the US government was clearly unprepared to cope with an eminently predictable disaster. After Katrina hit, the whole world watched as wealthier residents escaped while predominantly poor and Black residents, including many women and children, were abandoned to preventable suffering and death.

We are concerned and alarmed by the inaction, incompetence, and disregard for human life evidenced by your government in this calamity. Apart from its moral obligations, the Bush Administration appears to be in violation of binding international treaties in its preparation for and handling of this disaster.

Numerous experts, including the US Army Corps of Engineers, had warned for years that hurricanes could destroy New Orleans. In response, the Administration privatized and weakened the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), cut \$71.2 million from the Army Corps for levee

construction (a 44% reduction), and purged critics of these negligent policies.

Rather than accept responsibility and take remedial action, federal officials have falsely blamed local officials for not declaring a state of emergency; the poor, for not getting out of the way; and even the City of New Orleans for its location.

The Administration's racially biased resource allocation, preparation for and response to this catastrophe clearly violates US government obligations under article 3, 5(e)(iii) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

Your government's failure to provide for the basics of life for the internally displaced also violates its obligations of equal protection and non-discrimination recognized in the Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the American Declaration on the Rights of Man.

Even before Hurricane Katrina, HICs North American members and others had filed a complaint before the Inter American Commission on Human Rights citing non-compliance with these treaty obligations and with the standards elaborated under Article 26 of the OAS Convention, which the complainants note require the United States to progressively realize its citizens right to housing and the necessities of life, as elaborated under generally recognized international standards such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Far from progressively realizing housing rights, your government has perpetrated a silent hurricane of destruction of poor people's habitat, evidenced by the Bush Administration's failure to address massive homelessness, the loss of more than 300,000 low income housing units since 1996, and the need for new affordable housing. Instead, the Administration has waged a continued assault on Section 8 housing assistance to the poor.

In the wake of Katrina, we urge the US government to comply with its responsibilities under the OAS Charter by vastly expanding housing subsidy, restitution and other social supports, both for the 3.5 million US families who experience the emergency of homelessness each year as well as the 400,000 or more internally displaced victims of Katrina.

In addition, as many as half of the National Guard troops and equipment (such as high-water Humvees) which could have been available for disaster relief and homeland security have instead been diverted to fight your governments war in Iraq.

It is now clear to the world that your continued occupation of Iraq has made its citizens, as well as yours, less secure from acts of violence and terror, and undermined, not improved, global security. We urge you to end at once this occupation and provide instead for the security of your own people.

As thousands die in New Orleans because of misdirected resources, Katrina has washed away forever the illusion that the war in Iraq has made your citizens more secure.

Nor can your Administration escape responsibility for the origins of this disaster in global warming. For five years, the Bush Administration has refused to sign the Kyoto Accord on global climate change, and instead has adopted energy policies which have contributed to global warming and extreme weather across the planet.

One result of climate change has been a measurable increase of water temperatures in the Caribbean, which directly fuels the force and destructiveness of the annual hurricane cycle. If there were any doubts about the irresponsibility of the Administrations policies and its stubborn denial that global warming exists, they were blown away by Hurricane Katrina.

In this light, the position taken by the US government on the Secretary General's draft Outcome Statement for the MDG Global Summit is inappropriate to say the least. Rather than supporting urgent action to reverse global warming and extreme weather, the US proposes to delete any reference to global climate change.

Far from acknowledging its obligations to fight poverty at home and abroad, the US proposes to delete any reference to the Millenium Development Goals.

The US instead demands revisions to enhance "global security," seemingly unaware that US policies are the principle source of violence and insecurity in the Persian, and now the American, Gulf Coasts. The hubris and moral myopia revealed by these positions is utterly breathtaking.

We therefore urge the US government to embrace, and not reject, the global community and its offers to help.

Support, don't undermine, the Secretary General's draft Outcome Statement for the MDG Summit.

Honor, don't abnegate, your country's treaty obligations.

Work to develop and achieve MDG country goals for poverty reduction in United States, including the Gulf Coast impact area, and increase your country's Overseas Direct Aid to at least 0.7% to help other countries achieve their MDG targets as well.

Cease your occupation of the Middle East and return your National Guard to enhance the security and safety of your own people.

It is time to end the US government's long vacation from its true responsibilities at home and abroad.

Let the tragedy of Katrina inspire a spiritual and moral reawakening and a profound change of course by your Administration.

The peoples of the world will respond with the same outpouring of charity and support as they have to the American victims of this catastrophe.

On behalf of HIC General Assembly, Cairo, September 9, 2005
Enrique Flores Ortiz, President
Ana Sugranyes, General Secretary