



PRESS RELEASE

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Human Rights Organizations Call for Immediate Halt to Pending Demolition of 3,000 Units of New Orleans Public Housing

(Atlanta) - More than 40 human rights organizations today decried the scheduled demolition of 3,000 public housing units in New Orleans. The groups have issued a letter to U.S. Representative Maxine Waters, urging her continued leadership on behalf of public housing residents by finalizing dates for nationwide congressional hearings. The letter, part of a national campaign for passage of the Gulf Coast Housing Recovery Act, was also sent to Louisiana Senator David Vitter and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Alphonso Jackson.

"To demolish affordable housing without sufficient remaining low-income housing stock is not only irresponsible, but a violation of international human rights standards," said Jared Feuer, southern regional director of Amnesty International USA.

In their letter, the organizations note the bleak situation facing public housing across the nation, most prominently represented by the imminent demolition of 3,000 public housing units in New Orleans despite conflicting expert findings that the units are sound. In preparation for demolition, contractors have begun emptying apartments and discarding the personal property of residents without their knowledge or consent, including photographs, letters and social security cards.

"Every moment we fail to act is another unit demolished, another grandmother evicted, or another child who finds him or herself doing homework in a shelter. Our nation and human rights principles have long recognized the right to housing, and we call on our public leaders to take on this potent issue," said Catherine Albisa, executive director of the National Economic & Social Rights Initiative (NESRI).

According to international human rights standards, governments must provide specific safeguards with respect to housing for those who have been internally displaced by disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. The United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement mandate that host governments facilitate the voluntary return of the displaced to their homes or places of habitual residence in safety and with dignity.

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[The letter to Representative Waters follows.]

November 16, 2007

Honorable Maxine Waters
Member of Congress
35th District, California
2344 Rayburn Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Maxine Waters,

As human rights and housing rights organizations working around the world, we applaud the efforts you have taken to address the brutal situation facing residents of public and low income housing in the United States. Your initiatives, including your statements regarding the right to return for those displaced by hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the congressional bills you have sponsored, demonstrate your commitment to this important issue. Yet, we remain deeply concerned over the state of housing for low and moderate income Americans, and are particularly disturbed over the pending demolition of over 3,000 units of public housing in New Orleans. Specifically, we are concerned about reports that:

- (i) The demolition of public housing units in New Orleans is imminent. Yet, the independent survey to assess the number of displaced residents of New Orleans who wish to return to the city is not complete. Additionally, there are residents currently living in these units and it is unclear, at best, whether they will be able to access adequate replacement housing. This loss of housing represents a severe undermining of the already weak right to housing protections in New Orleans.
- (ii) The demolitions may be unnecessary. While housing officials have argued that due to damage from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the units are uninhabitable, expert testimony has contradicted these statements and attests that the units are structurally sound, and can become habitable. Pending resolution of such conflicting evidence, the demolitions should not occur.
- (iii) Finally, the dignity and personal possessions of the former residents are not being respected in this process. In preparation for demolition, contractors have begun emptying apartments and discarding the personal property of residents, including articles of great sentimental and emotional value such as photographs and letters and significant personal identification materials such as social security cards, without their knowledge or consent.

We urge you to assist efforts in stopping the proposed demolition of these units, at least until the Gulf Coast Housing Recovery Act of 2007 has been voted on in the Senate. Additionally, we urge you to finalize the dates for the national congressional hearings on preserving public and subsidized housing that you recently proposed during your meeting with Concerned Citizens of Greater Harlem. We hope that these hearings will be national in scope, taking place in several locations including New York City, as discussed during your meeting, and New Orleans.

Public housing residents in New Orleans find themselves caught between two unyielding governmental authorities: the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Even prior to the upcoming demolitions, mixed and confusing messages from both entities, along with little to no assistance, has denied tenants of public housing the right to return to and participate in the rebuilding of their communities. Additionally, actions taken by both

organizations have made it difficult for survivors to move past the tragedy of the storms and rebuild their lives. Because measures taken by HANO and HUD primarily impact Black and poor residents, they inevitably appear to have an undercurrent of racial and economic discrimination and exclusion.

The public housing crisis is unfolding within a broader human right to housing crisis. For example, the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center has documented widespread discrimination in the city's rental markets, and nearby White suburban communities have reportedly passed anti-subsidized housing legislation to ensure that Black and poor families do not settle in their neighborhoods. When added to this mix is HUD's inexplicable shortening of the normally 100-day demolition review process to one day, in order to expedite the destruction of the few existing public housing units, poor people literally have no where to turn. This violent push to demolish the public housing units represents an extreme manifestation of the policies and approaches to rebuilding New Orleans that appear to purge Black and poor communities from New Orleans almost by design.

Under human rights standards, governments must provide those who have been internally displaced by events such as natural disasters specific safeguards with respect to housing. Article 21(1) of the UN's Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which USAID recognizes when carrying out international development policy, states: "No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of property and possessions." Moreover, Article 28 (1) states: "Competent authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to establish conditions, as well as provide the means, which allow internally displaced persons to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence ..."

The hardships facing public housing residents are not only felt in New Orleans. In New York City, the Housing Authority of New York City is in financial disarray and remains vulnerable to private control. Under the HOPE VI program, HUD successfully demolished more public housing units in Chicago than they have thus far replaced. The over 13,000 demolished units in Chicago have forced approximately 20,000 residents from their homes and has left tens of thousands more on an indefinite waiting list. Throughout the United States housing is becoming acutely unaffordable with the resulting housing crisis increasing homelessness. Every moment we fail to act is another unit demolished, another grandmother evicted, or another child who finds him or herself doing homework in a shelter.

International human rights instruments speak to the human right to housing. Article 25(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was unanimously adopted by all the member countries of the United Nations, states: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well being of himself and of his family, including ... housing ..." Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states: "The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate ... housing ... and to the continuous improvement of living conditions." Additionally, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, a treaty to which the United States became a party in 1994, states: "States Parties undertake to prohibit and to eliminate racial discrimination in all its forms and to guarantee the right of everyone, ... to equality before the law, notably in the enjoyment of ... the right to housing."¹ Moreover, the U.S. government passed the Housing Act of 1949, in which the government pledged to realize: "as soon as feasible . . . the goal of a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family, thus contributing to the development and redevelopment of communities and to the advancement of the growth, wealth, and security of the nation."²

¹ International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination Article 5(e)(iii).

² The Housing Act of 1949, 42 U.S.C.A. § 1441.

Our nation and human rights principles have long recognized the importance of guaranteeing to every citizen the right to housing. Therefore, we call on your leadership in taking on such an overlooked, yet potent issue.

Sincerely,

1010 Development Corporation
ACLU of Mississippi
Advocates for Environmental Human Rights
Amnesty International, U.S.A.
Black Leadership Forum
C3/Hands Off Iberville
Center for Constitutional Rights
Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions
Center for Social Inclusion
CHAM Deliverance Ministry
City-Wide Task Force on Housing Court
Claretian Associates, Inc.
The Common Ground Relief Wetlands Restoration Project
Concerned Citizens of Greater Harlem
Eviction Defense Network
Global Rights
Good Ole Lower Eastside
Harlem Tenants Council
Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights
Housing Action Illinois
Housing Coalition Educators
Housing and Land Rights Network, Giza, Egypt
Interfaith Center of New York
International Action Center
Land Center for Human Rights, Cairo, Egypt
Louisiana NAACP
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
National Economic and Social Rights Initiative
National Law Center for Homelessness and Poverty
New York Solidarity for Katrina/Rita Survivors
Pax Christi New Orleans
Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund
People's Movement for Human Rights Learning
Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign
Poverty Matters
Public Housing Residents of the Lower Eastside
Student Hurricane Network
Survivors Village
Urban Poor Consortium, Jakarta, Indonesia
U.S. Human Rights Network

Philip L. Bereano, Professor Emeritus, University of Washington
Shulamith Koenig, Recipient of the 2003 United Nation Human Rights Award
*Dr. Zonke Majodina, Commissioner Human Rights, South Africa
*the Very Reverend James Parks Morton, founder of the Interfaith Center of New York
*Cindy Soohoo, Human Rights Institute, Columbia Law School

*organizational affiliations are for identification purposes only.

cc: Honorable David Vitter
Honorable Mary L. Landrieu
Honorable William J. Jefferson
Honorable Joseph Biden
Honorable Christopher J. Dodd
Honorable Diane Feinstein
Honorable Patrick J. Leahy
Honorable Edward Kennedy
Honorable Charles Schumer
Honorable Richard C. Shelby
Honorable Arlen Specter
Honorable John Conyers
Honorable Keith Ellison
Honorable Barney Frank
Honorable John Olver
Honorable Charles Rangel
Honorable Nydia M. Velázquez
Governor-Elect Bobby Jindal
Mayor Clarence Ray Nagin, Jr.
HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson