



Rep. Melvin L. Watt
Chair, Congressional Black Caucus
U.S. House of Representatives
2236 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515-3312

August 9, 2006

AMERICAN CIVIL
LIBERTIES UNION FOUNDATION

Dear Rep. Watt:

PLEASE RESPOND TO:
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The National Prison Project of the American Civil Liberties Union tomorrow will release a comprehensive report, *Abandoned & Abused: Orleans Parish Prisoners in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina*, documenting the abuses experienced by Louisiana prisoners in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. I am enclosing a copy of that report. In conjunction with the release of the report, the National Prison Project, together with Human Rights Watch and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., yesterday called upon the Federal Bureau of Investigations to expand the scope of its ongoing investigation into allegations of abuse at multiple correctional facilities during and after Hurricane Katrina, and to bring that investigation to a public conclusion as soon as possible.

The enclosed report documents the experiences of thousands of men, women, and children who were abandoned at Orleans Parish Prison ("OPP") in the days after the storm; many of these individuals were subjected to even worse conditions at jails and prisons around the state once they were finally rescued from OPP and transported out of New Orleans. I hope you have the opportunity to review these stories of abuse in connection with any future work you may do pertaining to the impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans.

As floodwaters rose in the OPP buildings, power was lost, and entire buildings were plunged into darkness. Deputies left their posts wholesale, leaving behind prisoners in locked cells, some standing in sewage-tainted water up to their chests. The report follows the prisoners to many of the jails and prisons around the state that took them in. Thousands of the men were first transported to the Elayn Hunt Correctional Center, where they were placed outdoors in a yard with inadequate food, medical care, and protection from other prisoners. At several other facilities, prisoners were subjected to systematic abuse and racially motivated assaults by prison guards.

It is important for you to review the accounts of the prisoners contained in this report, and to take them into consideration in any future work pertaining to the impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans. Although the FBI began a limited investigation into events surrounding the treatment of prisoners at the Jena Correctional Facility, that investigation needs to be expanded to include the misconduct that occurred before and after Hurricane Katrina at OPP, as well as the abuse of prisoners at several other facilities in Louisiana. Therefore, I urge you also to call for the Department of Justice to expand the scope of its investigation to cover the additional allegations of abuse documented in this report, and to complete its investigation in a prompt manner.

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Finally, the National Prison Project urges you to request that the Department of Justice commission a technical audit of OPP's emergency preparedness system. Such an audit could be conducted under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, which did review the evacuation efforts by the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, but excluded the failed evacuation at OPP from its review. We believe that a technical audit by the NIC would help to ensure that the mistakes chronicled in this report are never repeated.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Alexander
Director
ACLU National Prison Project

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1. *Abandoned & Abused: Orleans Parish Prisoners in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina*
2. Letter from Alison Parker, Theodore M. Shaw, and Elizabeth Alexander, to Michael A. Mason (Aug. 8, 2006)