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'Fire on the Bayou': African American leaders converge on New Orleans

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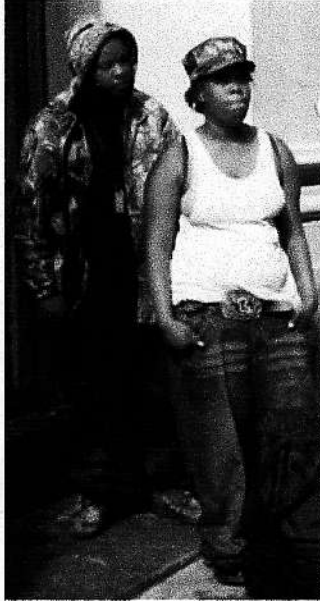
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by CC Campbell-Rock



African American leaders from all over the United States and from as far away as Canada are meeting for the Institute of the Black World 21st Century-sponsored Martin Luther King Holiday Weekend Initiative, entitled "The Struggle Against Racism and Inequality in New Orleans: National Days of Return and Action," set for Jan. 12-14 in the beleaguered Crescent City.

The gathering will be the first of its kind and magnitude held in post-Katrina New Orleans, and many are expecting to exit with a redevelopment plan for New Orleans based on evacuees' input, something that is missing in current deliberations by Mayor C. Ray Nagin's Bring Back New Orleans Commission.

Katrina evacuees Brandon Washington, left, and Creshe Green, who had just returned to New Orleans a week ago, were evicted Monday from their New Orleans hotel despite FEMA's deadline extension. A judge ordered the hotel to let them return to their rooms.

Photo: Bill Haber, AP

Commission to "shrink the footprint" of New Orleans.

A total of 29 organizations will come together in the African "village" tradition to discuss, analyze and plan the city's future through the eyes of evacuees. To that end, there will be plenty of fiery words for the powers that be in the city that care forgot.

The conference's primary sponsor is the Institute of the Black World 21st Century. Local co-sponsors include the African American Leadership Project, the Millions More Movement Local Organizing Committee, the People's Hurricane Relief Fund and the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. The national co-sponsors are the Progressive National Baptist Convention, National Black Environmental Justice Network, Hip Hop Caucus, Black Voices for Peace and the Black Family Summit of the Millions More Movement.

Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, Progressive National Baptist Convention President Rev. Dr. Major Jemison, Ron Daniels of the Institute of the Black World 21st Century,

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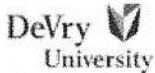
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Congresswoman Maxine Waters and other luminaries are expected to attend.

Perhaps the greatest catalyst for the Martin Luther King Holiday Weekend Initiative are news reports confirming that the Urban Land Institute suggested that certain neighborhoods, primarily African American communities, should not be rebuilt, especially if homeowners take too long to return to and fix up their homes.

More inflammatory, especially to African American evacuees, was the BBNO Commission's recent decision to give residents one year to return, and, if certain neighborhoods are not fully populated in that time, those who did return may be asked to leave and the communities left to be developed at the discretion of the mayor's BBNO Commission.

Aside from the commission being comprised primarily of white businessmen, more troubling is the fact that decisions are being made without the fair representation of members from communities at the heart of the "footprint" debate.

"The purpose of the initiative is to continue to focus national attention on the Hurricane Katrina disaster and its impact on hundreds of thousands of New Orleanians and people in the Gulf region. "The initiative also seeks to vigorously support the struggle of our brothers and sisters for the 'Right to Return' home with justice, equality and dignity," according to the agenda.

Activities include a Rebuilding and Redevelopment Conference, an Official Congressional Hearing of the Sub-Committee on Housing-House of Representatives of the United States, the Martin Luther King Jr. Ecumenical Right of Return Service, tour of New Orleans East and the Lower Ninth Ward, Town Hall Meeting, a march, demonstration and rally, and the Millions More Movement Black Family Summit.

Ron Daniels, founder and CEO of the Institute of the Black World 21st Century, has been to New Orleans several times in the past few months. He was there at the meeting called by Rev. Jesse Jackson last October, he participated in the March Across the Gretna Bridge called by the Hip Hop Caucus and he worked on Haitian relief efforts prior to the onslaught of hurricane season.

"I thought it was important to do something around Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s notion of a 'bounced check, a promissory note,'" Daniels said of Dr. King's prophetic words, in which the slain civil rights martyr said that America gave the Negro a check that came back marked insufficient funds.

"The promissory note issued by the federal government in the wake of Katrina, a mostly man-made catastrophe, came back marked NSF. Katrina exposed the raw, naked face of race and class in New Orleans," Daniels continued.

"We have to draw the line in the sand. Not only African Americans but progressives must ensure that people come back. We cannot allow them to carry out ethnic cleansing. They've been trying to get

rid of African Americans for a long time, whether intentionally or as a byproduct of this hurricane," he added.

Daniels said groups such as the National Black Farmers and other freedom fighters will be present to focus upon the agenda before Congress.

"There are certain moments when we have to galvanize around a particular issue. If the nation can find billions of dollars for the demonic suction of war, there should be no problem in helping evacuees. There should be no artificial deadlines. We must make sure that Katrina victims are not forgotten," Daniels affirmed.

"Katrina has paved the way to ethnic cleansing - Black removal, no matter how you look at it. We're planning for a huge mobilization to keep Katrina on the agenda," said Mtangulizi Sanyika, project manager, African American Leadership Project, co-convenor of the Millions More Movement Local Organizing Committee and former adjunct professor at Dillard University.

The educator said prominent leaders such as Dr. Ed Blakely, an international builder who ran for mayor of Oakland and the current chair of Urban Regional Planning at the University of Melbourne, Australia, Phil Thompson, M.I.T. housing expert, and Abul Rasheed, a development practitioner, will be on hand to critique the Mayor's BBNO redevelopment set for release this Wednesday.

Prior to returning to New Orleans to care for his mother, who passed in November, Sanyika taught Bay Area college students.

"People are planning and making decisions without us. We're trying to reverse that trend. We must keep the Katrina issue in the national debate. We're concerned that Dr. King's legacy of struggle and fighting for justice will be forgotten, if we don't carry on the work," Sanyika explained.

"We're trying to make sure that King's legacy is not co-opted into nothingness," said Pastor Tom Watson of Watson Memorial Teaching Ministry. Watson was cursed at by Jefferson Parish Sheriff Harry Lee when the minister spoke about the way Jefferson Parish deputies fired 100 rounds into a truck, killing a Black teenage suspected of having stolen the truck.

Hotel evictions reversed

Meanwhile, on Friday, Jan. 13, at 10 a.m., Judge Michael Bagneris will preside over a hearing regarding a request by evacuees, initially booted out of the Quality Inn Maison St. Charles in New Orleans, for permanent relief. New Orleanians and hurricane evacuees Pauline Powell, Aretha Powell, Kevin Laroque, Velma Willis and April Johnson were ordered to leave the hotel before the first FEMA deadline, Jan. 7.

In fact, FEMA declared in December 2005 that the temporary housing deadline was extended to Feb. 7. It is unclear whether the hotel got that message; however, the news was widely published and available on FEMA's website.

The upcoming hearing is a continuation of the temporary restraining order won on Jan. 7 by lawyers Tracie L. Washington, William P. Quigley and R. Judson Mitchell Jr. of Loyola University New Orleans School of Law and Judith Brown, Ishmael Muhammad and Miles Granderson of the Advancement Project in Washington, D.C.

Washington and Quigley, both civil rights attorneys, are reputedly the most ardent defenders of New Orleanians' civil and human rights. Many of the cases they have worked on - from educational injustices to freeing incarcerated justice advocates - they have taken on pro bono.

"On Tuesday and Wednesday of this week (Jan. 3-4), defendant notified plaintiffs in this action and several other residents of Quality Inn Maison St. Charles that they would be evicted from their homes, without adequate notice or due process to appeal this abrupt decision," the attorneys wrote.

After hearing from both sides, Judge Bagneris ruled: "It is hereby ordered, adjudged, and decreed that defendant Quality Inn Maison St. Charles and all of its employees, agents and contractors are enjoined and prohibited from evicting and/or discharging any evacuee residing at the hotel as a result of the hotel's participation in the Short-Term Lodging Program operated by FEMA. Moreover, any such evacuee previously discharged and/or evicted this date must be allowed to return to their rooms at the hotel immediately."

With Mardi Gras parades set to begin, last week's judgment had to have hit area hotels, wishing to get rid of evacuees to make room for high-spending tourists, like a ton of bricks.

If events go as projected, there will be plenty of "fire on the bayou" and, perhaps, a sea change in the way evacuees have been tossed out and about. "The nation is on trial," Daniels concluded.

For more information on the MLK Initiative, contact the Institute of the Black World 21st Century at 1 (877) 424-8404 or info@ibw21.org. CC Campbell-Rock, a native New Orleanian, veteran journalist and Katrina evacuee, is the new editor of the Bay View. Email her at campbellrock@sfbayview.com.