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The Big Easy? Now It's Limbo Land

Slow-Moving Bureaucracy Leaves New Orleans Stuck in a Cycle of Waiting

By [Linton Weeks](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

Thursday, February 9, 2006; Page A01

NEW ORLEANS, Feb. 8 -- When Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco told a special legislative session Monday night that "It's time to play hardball, as I believe it's the only game that Washington understands," she was speaking with the fervor and frustration of someone living in Limbo Land.

Mayor C. Ray Nagin has also been wrestling with ways to break the bureaucratic logjams that he says are preventing New Orleans from rebuilding. He recently met with officials from foreign countries, including France and Jordan, looking for help. "We had a little disappointment earlier from some signals that we're getting from Washington," Nagin told a local television station, "but the international community may be able to fill the gap."

Officials here are resorting to strong words -- Blanco is threatening to try to block federal sales of leases for gas and oil off the Louisiana coast -- and pleas to foreign nations because they say they need more money to rebuild New Orleans. They are trying to appeal to the federal government and also minister to impatient constituents. New Orleanians are angry that President Bush did not devote more of his State of the Union speech to the city and are concerned that Washington's attention is no longer trained on them. They feel as though they are living in the mean in-between.

You hear some version of that everywhere in New Orleans. You can't do this till that happens, and you can't do that till this happens. In the air there is a scent of temporariness. Gone is the putrid aroma of post-Katrina mud and sludge, yet the sour stench of stale French Quarter libations has not fully returned. On the calendar, the city sits at a midway point between hurricane seasons.

Women of the Storm, a group of about 140 concerned citizens, flew to Washington recently to try to get Congress to pay attention to the tragic lives and landscape of the Gulf Coast region; Blanco (D) wants the Washington powers to tour the devastation. That straight shot from there to here, from the Beltway to Bourbon Street, is the road to Limbo Land.

With calliope music blaring from a tour boat on the nearby Mississippi River, ticket seller Suzi Cobb, 59, provided a tragicomic description of the puzzling purgatory that post-Katrina New Orleans has become: "We're caught in a circle."

Tourists aren't coming to New Orleans, she explained, because they can't find a place to stay. They can't find a place to stay because the hotels are full of federal relief workers, construction crews and evacuees, many of whom have no homes. Evacuees who do still have houses can't begin to fix them up because they have no jobs or income. And until they get out of the hotels so that tourists will have a place to stay, Cobb said, there will be no tourists and therefore no jobs for the workers.

"We are in limbo and on hold," Nagin told the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee last week.

There are so many symbols of Limbo Land: Vast sections of the city are still without utilities. Without electricity, businesses can't open their doors; without open businesses, electric bills can't be paid. House-gutting companies advertise everywhere, but many homes are too far gone for gutting. Of an estimated 50 million cubic yards of hurricane and flood debris, about 6 million has been picked up, the city's Web site reported. Countless cars litter the landscape, rendered useless by the floodwaters. Ridership on buses and streetcars operated by the Regional Transit Authority has fallen from 855,000 rides per week before Katrina to 60,000 or fewer, according to a mid-January situation report by the Bring New Orleans Back commission. Only 17 of 122 public schools have reopened.



Mary Howard of Lake Charles, La., joins about 400 others displaced by Hurricane Katrina in marching to the U.S. Capitol. "We want to go home" and "Where is the money?" were the chants of storm victims who will continue their rally and protest in the District today. Story, A12. (By Michael Williamson -- The Washington Post)

Graphic

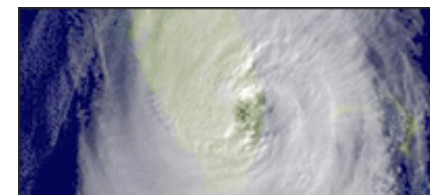
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And 11,000 of 15,000 people working in the city's cultural positions lost their jobs, the commission noted. Without musicians and chefs, there will be no traditional music and food; without music and food, there will be no distinctively New Orleans culture.

New Orleans is a Gordian knot of complications that has tied up just about everyone. Like most of her constituents, state Sen. Ann Duplessis lives in a holding pattern: "I am also a Limbo Lander," she said.

At 44, Duplessis represents the Lower Ninth Ward. She said she tells her home-owning constituents in this wait-and-see world to line up all of the contractors they think they will need, get all of the necessary permits and arrange all of the financing so that when word does come down about whether a neighborhood will be eradicated or rebuilt, the homeowners will be prepared to act swiftly.



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