

After five days, thousands of anguished storm victims finally have a reason for hope

HELP AT LAST



STAFF PHOTO BY ELIOT KAMENITZ

METAIRIE: Helicopters evacuate people in need of medical help as crowds of others displaced by Hurricane Katrina pile into buses near the intersection of Veterans Memorial and Causeway boulevards.

Amid chaos, a rare voice of strength

By Brian Thevenot
Staff writer

In front of the Convention Center on Saturday, amid a crowd of refugees weeping and trading stories of raped children and dead babies in freezers, an elderly woman in a yellow shirt lay near death, tremors coursing through her limbs.

A few minutes later, she stopped shaking.

And yet, in that hell, Anita Roach raised her voice to the heavens, belting out the gospel standards that had comforted her since childhood: through homelessness, through friendlessness, through the death of her son and through the flood that nearly killed her and her husband in their Lower 9th Ward home.

"When the storm
Of life is raging,
Stand by me, stand by me..."

Five days after Hurricane Katrina, as National Guardsmen and evacuation buses finally pulled onto Tchoupitoulas Street a block away, Roach stood out as a beacon of beauty and strength against a backdrop of death and despair. As she began to sing, a group of over-stressed National Guardsmen carted away the nearby woman's



STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

NEW ORLEANS: Anita Roach, who used to live in the Lower 9th Ward, leads those around her in gospel songs. Hundreds of people were waiting for a bus to take them from the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.

newly dead body to put it with many others. First they placed her body on the street corner, then carried it through an employee entrance guarded by machine guns and laid her to rest in a freezer.

Roach never stopped singing, never stopped smiling, never stopped comforting a crowd of some of the last of Hurricane Katrina's victims to receive even a shred of assistance. She sang from her belly with a voice that could be heard down the block, drowning out cries for help and the rumble of National Guard

trucks. One by one, family, friends and complete strangers joined her, clapping and singing as she led them as she had as choir director at New Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church in Bridge City.

"When this world
Is tossing me
Like a ship on the raging sea
Thou who rulest the winds and water
Stand by me, stand by me "

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Authorities regaining grip on city

From staff reports

Federal troops and relief convoys continued to pour into New Orleans on Saturday, even as buses evacuated additional thousands of debilitated refugees who endured the most horrific five days in the 287-year history of this once-elegant city.

But if relief was in sight, it was not yet at hand.

Thousands of men, women and children who fled impoverished neighborhoods flooded by Hurricane Katrina waited listlessly for relief at the threshold of death and despair at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.

They said they had been without food and water until Friday.

Corpses lay under blankets among them. One man in the shelter said he counted seven bodies as he waited over three days, and there were reports of violence.

Still, the evacuees asserted their dignity. Many made clear they resented the general characterization that those left behind in New Orleans were thugs and looters.

As another among them died Saturday, they eulogized the departed by singing the gospel music that

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