

Hurricane victims reluctant to rebuild

Many in Louisiana wary of next step

By MICHELLE ROBERTS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW ORLEANS

More than 16 months after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita forced an unprecedented exodus from the Louisiana Gulf Coast, tens of thousands of homeowners have decided not to rebuild or have yet to make up their minds, an Associated Press analysis found.

Associated Press looked at applications to the federally funded Louisiana Road Home program, which dispenses up to \$150,000 per homeowner to rebuild or sell out to the state. Nearly 98,000 people have applied so far.

Two-thirds of all applicants said they want to rebuild their damaged properties, while more than a quarter have indicated they want out or can't decide what to do.

But in dozens of towns and neighborhoods, particularly those closest to the coast, the percentages of homeowners on the fence or on the way out are higher than average, with as many as two out of three homeowners not committed to rebuilding.

The areas, 31 ZIP codes in all, include several heavily damaged New Orleans neighborhoods such as Lakeview and the Ninth Ward.

Michael Kurth, a McNeese State University economics professor who has done research for the Louisiana Recovery Authority, said he is not surprised.

"With the scale of destruction that occurred in those coastal areas, it wasn't a matter of 'Let's return in a month or in two months,'" Kurth said.

"In a lot of cases, you couldn't go back to what was there before. It's just not there."

Homeowners who remain undecided could still rebuild their destroyed homes. But by now, many are resettled in new homes, schools and jobs.

Louisiana demographer Elliott Stonecipher said it is safe to assume that those who were going to commit themselves to rebuilding would have done so by now.

As many as 123,000 homeowners may be eligible for Louisiana Road Home aid. The program dispenses grants not only to rebuild damaged homes, but also to fortify undamaged ones by raising them off the ground or installing hurricane shutters.

In Arabi, Chalmette and Meraux, all in hard-hit St. Bernard Parish, roughly two-thirds of applicants want to move out or are still uncertain about whether to rebuild.

Karen Ritter, 45, said the home she shares with her 80-year-old mother in Arabi is on the verge of collapse.

Other homeowners are old and have "lived here all their lives. They had everything they lived for in their houses. If they don't have children to help them, there's nothing for them to do" but give up and move out, Ritter said.

"In a lot of cases, you couldn't go back to what was there before. It's just not there."

Michael Kurth, Economics professor on how people's homes were so completely ruined by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita that deciding what to do next is not easy

THE WAR IN IRAQ



A truck is loaded with weapons confiscated from militants after clashes at Zarqa, northeast of Najaf, Iraq, on Monday. U.S.-backed Iraqi troops killed a Shiite cult leader from the group Jund al-Samaa, or Soldiers of Heaven, who reportedly planned to kill clerics on a holy day.

Shiite cult leader killed

Officials: Group planned to murder clerics on holy day

By SINAN SALAHEDDIN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq

Iraqi officials said Monday that U.S.-backed Iraqi troops had targeted a messianic cult called Soldiers of Heaven in a weekend battle that left 200 fighters dead, including the group's leader, near the Shiite holy city of Najaf.

A military commander said hundreds of gunmen planned to disguise themselves as pilgrims and kill clerics on the holiest day of the Shiite calendar.

The Iraqi government spokesman, Ali al-Dabbagh, said the raid on Sunday in date-palm orchards on the city's outskirts was aimed against the fringe Shiite cult that some Iraqi officials said had links to Saddam Hussein loyalists and foreign fighters. Officials said the group, which included families, was hoping the violence it planned would force the return of the "hidden imam," a 9th-century Shiite saint who Shiites believe will come again to bring peace and justice to the world.

U.S. and British jets played a major role in the fighting, dropping 500-pound bombs on the militants' positions, but

President Bush said the battle was an indication that Iraqis were beginning to take control.

"My first reaction on this report from the battlefield is that the Iraqis are beginning to show me something," Bush told National Public Radio.

The fighting began Sunday and ended Monday. U.S. officials said an American military helicopter crashed during the battle, killing two soldiers on board but gave no further details. Maj. Gen. Othman al-Ghanemi, the Iraqi commander in charge of the Najaf region, said the aircraft was shot down. It was the second U.S. military helicopter to crash in eight days.

Both Mohammed al-Askari, the defense ministry spokesman, and al-Ghanemi said 200 terrorists were killed and 60 were wounded, lowering previous estimates. Al-Ghanemi said 150 had been captured, while al-Askari put that figure at 120.

Authorities said Iraqi soldiers supported by U.S. aircraft fought all day Sunday with a large group of insurgents in the Zarqa area, about 12 miles northeast of Najaf.

Provincial Gov. Assad Sultan Abu Kilel said the insurgents had planned to attack

Shiite pilgrims and senior clerics in Najaf during ceremonies marking Ashoura, the holiest day in the Shiite calendar commemorating the 7th-century death of Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. The celebration culminates Tuesday in huge public processions in Najaf, Karbala and other Shiite cities.

Al-Ghanemi said the army captured some 500 automatic rifles in addition to mortars, heavy machine guns and Russian-made Katyusha rockets in what amounted to a major test for Iraq's new military as it works toward taking over responsibility for security from U.S.-led forces.

The commander said the leader of the group, called the Jund al-Samaa, or Soldiers of Heaven, was among those killed and identified him as an Iraqi named Ahmed Hassan al-Yamani, who went by several aliases and was armed with two pistols when he died.

Al-Ghanemi said 600 to 700 gunmen had planned to disguise themselves as pilgrims and attack Najaf today, the day they believed that the Imam Mahdi, or the "hidden imam," would reappear. He said leading Shiite ayatollahs consider such fringe elements as heretics.

BRIEFS

STATE

WEST LAFAYETTE

Center aiding in search for man to stay open

Purdue University plans to keep open a volunteer center set up to aid in the search for a missing freshman.

Wade Steffey, 19, of Bloomington, was last seen early Jan. 13 after a party at the Phi Kappa Theta fraternity house on the north side of campus.

IN Hope, an advocacy group for families of missing people, had been running the Wade Steffey Volunteer Center near Ross-Ade Stadium. The group had decided to close it at the request of Steffey's family, who wanted campus life to return to normal, said Patti Bishop, coordinator for IN Hope.

But the university has decided to keep it open, said Jeanne Norberg, Purdue spokeswoman.

"IN Hope understood the need to have a place for volunteers and a staff to organize searches, and the university appreciates their initiative," Norberg said. "The search, however, is far from over, and we continue to need the public's help."

INDIANAPOLIS

Indiana Senate begins session with prayer

The Indiana Senate began its session Monday with an official prayer for the first time since a federal judge's ruling barred sectarian House invocations as part of legislative business.

The Senate had been observing a moment of silent prayer or meditation to start each session day since November 2005, when U.S. District Judge David Hamilton ruled that official House prayers that mentioned Jesus Christ amounted to state endorsement of a religion. That case is now on appeal before the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Chicago.

Senate President Pro Tem David Long, who took over as the Senate's leader this year, said his members felt it was important to go back to an oral prayer, even if the invocations cannot mention the word Jesus.

Sen. Dennis Kruse, R-Auburn, gave Monday's prayer, which asked God for divine guidance. Kruse said he was careful to meet the guidelines of the court ruling.

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