

Asian **TSUNAMI** community leaders visit New Orleans & Gulf Coast communities hit by Hurricane **KATRINA**

Notes on a people-to-people exchange visit in July, 2007



One year of the Asian Tsunami / Hurricane Katrina exchange process :

Over the past year, groups of survivors from the Asian tsunami and from Hurricane Katrina (along with their support organizations) have traveled around the world to visit each other several times, as part of a growing program of mutual support across cultures and across the world.

Linking with poor communities in USA - A new experience for ACHR! In the past 20 years, most of ACHR's work has involved developing learning and mutual support links between developing countries within Asia and Africa. For us, this exploratory exchange with poor, disaster-hit communities in the USA (the richest, most powerful country on earth!) was a completely new experience. The idea of this on-going exchange has been to give people from these very different parts of the world and very different political cultures a chance to compare notes on how they have dealt with the problems of rebuilding their lives and communities after major calamities, and to find ways of supporting each others' struggles in direct, human and practical ways - based on their very real experiences they have gone through.

The tsunami-Katrina exchange, which is a first for many of the groups involved, is being jointly organized and supported by three groups :

- **The National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI)** in New York
- **The National Policy and Advocacy Council on Homelessness (NPACH)** in USA (with a branch in New Orleans)
- **The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR)** in Bangkok

1. **First visit Asia to New Orleans, July 2006 :** The first exploratory visit to New Orleans by two members of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) took place in July 2006, on the way home from the World Urban Forum in Vancouver, where we organized a networking event on "Community Driven Disaster Rehabilitation."
2. **First visit New Orleans to Asia, September 2006 :** Just two months later, the first group of Katrina survivors from New Orleans traveled to Asia to visit tsunami-hit communities in Thailand and Indonesia in September 2006.
3. **Second visit New Orleans to Asia, November 2006 :** Another larger group from New Orleans and Gulf Coast communities followed in November 2006, where besides visiting with tsunami-hit communities in Thailand and Aceh, they also participated in a large, regional seminar on disaster reconstruction in Phuket, Thailand.
4. **Second visit Asia to New Orleans, July 2007 :** In July 2007, the first group of tsunami survivors from Thailand and Indonesia traveled to New Orleans to visit several of the friends they had made on the earlier exchanges and to see with their own eyes how a major calamity like Hurricane Katrina is being responded to in the wealthiest, most powerful country in the world. The following few pages contain a brief report from Tom on this most recent trip.

Who went?

It had been our hope to bring teams from all four tsunami-hit countries this time, to join in this exposure to conditions in a wealthy, developed country after a major disaster. But finally, the team from India was not able to join the trip, and the team of women community leaders from Sri Lanka's Women's Bank were denied visas to the USA. Finally, it was only the Thai and Indonesian teams who were able to get visas and go. Don't pay any attention to what it says on the Statue of Liberty in New York ("Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free..."), America is like a fortress and no easy country to enter!

From THAILAND : (6 persons)

1. **Mr. MAITREE JONGKRAIJUG** (Community leader from Ban Nam Khem Village, Phang Nga Province). This is the seaside town most badly affected by the tsunami, and Maitree was one of the key leaders in helping to organize survivors after the waves, and to set up the large relief camp outside the town. Maitree is also the chairman of the Ban Naam Khem Community Bank, which was set up by poor and landless tsunami survivors.
2. **Ms. PAIRAT PHANGCHAN** (Community leader from Plaa Katak Community, Phuket Province). This is the small land-rent community we visited on the second Katrina-Tsunami exchange, which produces the dried tiny sardines. This community was only mildly affected by the tsunami, but after the crisis, were threatened with eviction. With support from the Phuket Community Network (which was formed and became strong through the tsunami rehabilitation process), they have negotiated to collectively lease a piece of public land adjacent to the community, and are now building their new houses.
3. **Mr. JAMNONG THAJITNIRAT** is an experienced free-lance community organizer in Thailand. Jamnong was one of the key people to help organize the survivors in Phangnga and Phuket provinces, in the chaotic hours and days after the tsunami. He was especially active in helping set up the people-managed relief camp at Ban Nam Khem.
4. **Ms. PIKUN SITTIPRASERTKUN** (Freelance translator, researcher) Pikun has been consistently involved in the tsunami rehabilitation process from the first day, first as a volunteer, researcher, translator and organizer. Pikun was our translator during both Katrina visits, and so she also has a good sense about the issues in New Orleans and the gulf coast.
5. **Mr. THOMAS KERR** (Publications coordinator with the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, Bangkok).
6. **Mr. PETER SWAN** (Film maker, ACHR volunteer). Peter has worked with ACHR for many years, to help prepare video films about various community development and community exchange programs, and prepared a documentary film about the first Katrina-Tsunami exchange visit in Thailand and Aceh.

From ACEH, INDONESIA : (2 persons)

7. **MR. AFRIZAL** is a community leader from Lam Manyang Village, a fishing village in Banda Aceh, Aceh, which was completely destroyed by the December 26, 2004 tsunami, killing 70% of the village's population. He has been one of the key leaders in the Udeep Beusaree Network of 26 adjacent villages which have planned and carried out the rebuilding of their villages and restoring of their economic and cultural lives.
8. **MR. SYAIFUL** is another key community leader from Cot Lamkuweh Village, another fishing village in Banda Aceh, in the Udeep Beusaree Network of 26 adjacent villages.

Visit Schedule :

Sunday July 1, 2007 :

- Arrive in New Orleans, late night

Monday July 2 :

- Visit Holy Cross Neighborhood Association (Lower 9th Ward, New Orleans)
- Visit Bienvenue Bayeau (which borders the Lower 9th Ward)
- Visit Mary Queen of Vietnam (Catholic Vietnamese community in New Orleans East)
- Dinner at Tom and Stephanie Carton's house (NPACH)

Tuesday July 3 :

- Visit Women's Welfare Rights Organization, Gentilly Neighborhood, New Orleans
- Visit first "Transitional Housing" joint project by Asia-returned groups.
- Seminar on the Katrina / Tsunami exchange at Loyola Law School, New Orleans

- Evening - walking tour of the historic French Quarter of New Orleans.

Wednesday July 4 : (American Independence Day)

- Joined in a demonstration to push for reopening of Public Housing in front of City Hall
- Visit "Survivors Village" at the (locked) St. Bernard Public Housing Project, New Orleans
- Visit the B.W. Cooper Public Housing Project (partially re-opened), New Orleans
- Dinner and fireworks in the Holy Cross Neighborhood, on the Mississippi River levee.

Thursday July 5 :

- Visit to the Mississippi Immigration Rights Alliance (MIRA) in Biloxi, Mississippi
- Tour of hurricane Katrina devastation (and Casino rebuilding!) on Mississippi coast
- Visit Mount Zion church in the small, rural coastal (and badly-hit) community of Pearlington, Mississippi.
- Farewell dinner and closing discussions at Hope House, New Orleans

Friday July 6

- Depart for Asia, morning.

Breakfast with the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association, Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans

The Holy Cross Neighborhood is a historic neighborhood which has traditionally been a poor, black neighborhood. It is part of the Lower 9th Ward, which was the city's worst-affected area - it received both the flooding and the surge from the broken levee. The neighborhood has lots of beautiful old "shotgun" houses made of cypress wood, with high ceilings and raised up on cinder blocks.

- **Before the hurricane, there were 6,000 people living in this neighborhood. Only 1,000 have returned.** Many empty and deteriorating houses everywhere. People are afraid to return because the levees are still not strong, or they don't have insurance to repair their houses, plus no government aid to help people come back. Plus, the schools in the neighborhood are all closed.
- **Lots of developers buying up house plots cheaply from people**, and also real estate speculators buying up these historic homes and renovating them to re-sell or rent at high rates to incoming yuppies (black and white)
- **The Holy Cross Neighborhood Association was formed in 1981**, to mobilize community opposition to a project to widen the Industrial Canal, which would have wiped out a lot of the neighborhood. Since Katrina, has been the focus point for the efforts to get people to return to the neighborhood. The association is directed by Pam Dashiell, who came to Thailand and Aceh on the first trip. The association has its office at the back of a lovely old wooden church, that has been carefully restored after the storm.
- The Holy Cross Neighborhood's first meeting of returned families happened in December 2005, 4 months after the storm. At that meeting, there were only 6 people. Now they get about 150 people at the last meeting.
- **Activities of the Neighborhood Association :** They have a project to jointly purchase building materials cheaply to help returning people repair their storm-damaged houses. They also have a "neighbor watch" program to try to control the crime, which has escalated in the neighborhood, what with so many empty houses and few people. They also run a center for Sustainable Redevelopment of the Neighborhood, which is trying to bring an environmentally sustainable angle into the neighborhood's rebuilding, with solar panels, insulation, etc.
- **Big activity : Reviving the adjacent wetlands - Bayeau Bienvenue :** The Holy Cross Neighborhood Association is working closely with environmentalists and academics from the University of Wisconsin to develop plans to revive the huge bayou (swampy forest land) which is adjacent to the neighborhood. This bayou has traditionally provided storm protection for the neighborhood, and also a place to play, swim, fish and hunt. But with pollution and wrongful environmental policies, this huge wetlands has



become a vast lake of brackish polluted water, which protects nothing. Used to be filled with giant Cypress trees, but when the salt water came here, all the cypress trees died, and now there are only stumps.

- **All these activities are seen as ways to bring people in the neighborhood together, around important issues that they all face.**

Visit to Bienvenue Bayeau, next to the Lower Ninth Ward

What a bleak outlook! We climb up on the levee, and see a vast lake on the other side, punctuated with the stumps of dead cypress trees. It used to be a thick forest of cypress trees, threaded with water channels and swampy places where all kinds of animals lived, fish, etc. The project to revive this wetlands will take a long time and a lot of money. First step is to get rid of the salt water. If it is only fresh water, the cypress seedlings can grow again.

- **Swamps in Louisiana different than mangroves in Asia :** The swamps in Louisiana are in fresh-water areas, and the main thing is they have cypress trees - the huge and very hardwood trees from which many houses in the south are built. If any salt water gets mixed in, the cypress trees die immediately, and their stumps remain for a long, long time, because the wood is so strong and water-proof. But in Thailand and Aceh, most of the coastal swamps are mangrove forests, which thrive on brackish water, which is a mixture of fresh and salty water.



Visit to Mary Queen of Vietnam, New Orleans East.

We are introduced to this amazingly well-organized community of Vietnamese Catholics by Father Luke, who had come on the first trip to Thailand and Aceh.

- **Big Vietnamese lunch :** The long table in the rectory was full of wonderful dishes prepared by a local Vietnamese restaurant, for us. We only began to discuss after having a big feast.
- **Almost all the families in the community are now back,** and most of their homes have been completely repaired. This is in SHARP contrast to the other flooded neighborhoods in the city, where most people are still not returned.
- Father Luke tells the story of the storm, the evacuation and the church's project to direct the process of bringing everyone in the parish home and helping them to repair their houses. All very well organized and well coordinated by the Church.
- **Many new activities since the storm which the community is working on collectively :** community business development, community gardens and market, seniors housing.
- **Key idea here :** The storm helped the community here realize the importance of long-term planning process to develop their community and to create a united front to oppose bad plans by the city, including plans to build a garbage dump nearby.



Visit to Women's Welfare Rights Organization, Gentilly Neighborhood, New Orleans

The Welfare Rights Organization is a non-profit started 26 years by Viola Washington, who was on the first trip to Thailand and Indonesia. Women-owned and women-operated. Their funding comes from foundation

grants, plus some income from an apartment complex they run, which offers 12 affordable apartments to welfare families.

- **Before the hurricane**, the organization focused on helping women and single mothers to get access to public welfare services and resources, in an environment where government cuts continue to make the public welfare system harder and harder to access. The organization has also lobbied to try to improve some of the bad turns the state and national welfare systems have taken.
- **After the hurricane** : the organization has been working to try to help poor renter families who have lost their cheap rental accommodation (especially women-headed) to get housing and return to New Orleans. In some cases, they help pay people's rental deposits and first utility bills, until they can get jobs and pay the rent on their own.
- So far they have helped 75 families to get into affordable housing.



- Before the storm, New Orleans was 69% black.
 - Today, two years after the storm, New Orleans is 27% black.
- The problem is that the people who are returning to the city are those who have the money to do so. The poor can't come home because they don't have the means to repair their damaged houses (if they were home-owners) or they can't afford the sky-rocketing rental rates (if they were renters) and don't have job.

Visit Joint Transitional Housing Project - a pilot project

This is a project which is being undertaken as a pilot by the new, loose network of groups which had come to Asia. The idea is to put their energy and resources together to try to begin developing some housing where people can stay who want to come back to New Orleans and rebuild their lives, but have no place to stay. The first project is this house in Gentilly, which has to be extensively repaired after the storm (and subsequent looting).

- **Sam Jackson**, from the B.W. Cooper Public Housing Project is helping to manage the repair work.
- **Viola Washington and Tom Carton** (NPACH) have been coordinating the project.
- **Welfare Rights Organization** owns the house (2 units) and used it as an office before the storm.
- **Nathalie Walker** (Advocates for Environmental Rights) has helped to raise funds for the building materials.
- **Vicky Cintra** (MIRA in Biloxi) is helping to provide workers



Endesha Juakali describes the transitional house process : The transitional home concept we're working on together came directly out of the experience we had with one village we visited in Aceh. That village was totally wiped out by the tsunami, and they didn't have any homes at all. And they made a decision to rebuild the village. And the question we had was how do you decide which home is going to be built first? And what they did was they decided who to build for first according to need - whomever need the house most badly, they went first with families, with women with children and with large families first. And they just decided they were going to rebuild the village, one house at a time, by determining who needed the house the worst, and building that house first. Then when that family got in, the team village would then go on to the next home, based upon need.

So our concept with the transitional home that's being fixed up now (primarily by Viola's Welfare Rights organization, which already had a damaged structure available for renovating. Sam Jackson is doing most of the physical work - and he's doing a great job. Nathalie is helping us find grant funds for the building materials and Vicky is going to help bring in some workers to do the finishing). The idea was that all of us would just chip in different ways and do that one home, through Welfare Rights, and get a couple of families in there. And then those families, along with the rest of us, would then help to build the next transitional home, based upon who needed it next to that family. And we're going to have to rebuild neighborhoods in New Orleans one home at a time, one block at a time, one section at a time. Like they say it in Aceh, the way to decide on which home is first is to decide which family needs the help the most, help that family and then go on building based upon that need-based criteria. But the concept of determining which home is going to be built first, strictly by which family needs it the most, came from our direct experience that we had in Aceh.

Katrina / Tsunami Public Seminar at Loyola Law School :

It was during this most recent exchange visit, which happened nearly two years after Hurricane Katrina, that a public seminar was organized to give a chance for these visitors to exchange their experiences and ideas about community-driven disaster rehabilitation, in a more structured discussion, with some of the New Orleans and Gulf Coast groups which have been involved in the exchange. The seminar was hosted by the Loyola Law School, in New Orleans, and moderated by Professor Bill Quigley, who runs Loyola's Law Clinic and who has been actively supporting the right to return of New Orleans' poorest residents, particularly those people who have been locked out of the city's closed public housing projects. The seminar was held during the July 4th holiday period, so a lot of folks were busy with their families and off on holiday outings. But all the same, we got an enthusiastic audience of concerned New Orleans citizens, activists, public housing residents, representatives from communities and non-profits in Gulf Coast areas and well-wishers from the university. In the following pages, we present the full, transcribed discussion from this seminar.



- *A full transcript and photos of this seminar are attached with this report, or can be downloaded from the ACHR website : www.achr.net*

Public Demonstration in support of re-opening New Orleans' Public Housing Projects

On July 4, we joined in a public demonstration at Duncan Plaza, in front of New Orleans City Hall, to give our support to the reopening of the 5 closed public housing projects in New Orleans.

- **5,000 units of perfectly habitable public housing are still closed, 2 years after the storm.** One of the worst stories to come out of the Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans is the issue of the city's public housing. The government has used the storm as an excuse to close and lock up 5,000 units of affordable, public housing, and to develop plans to demolish it and replace it with "mixed income" housing (for-sale and for rent). This is at a time with the city is desperate for affordable housing, since so many rental units have been destroyed by the storm and the ones that are available have risen sharply in price.
- **A house rental which rented for \$450 per month before the storm, now rents for \$1,500 at least!**
- Homeless guy at the demonstration : *"The rich can buy justice, but when you're poor, it's just us."*



- **Senate Bill 16-68.** There is a bill now in the US senate to support the reopening of public housing in New Orleans and to help people come home.

Visit to B.W. Cooper Public Housing Project :

The vast B.W. Cooper Public Housing Project in New Orleans had 1,100 apartments (single and two-story) before the storm. The buildings are still in very good condition - just some mold damage on the ground floors. But most of the complex remains closed to its former tenants, who have nowhere else to go.

- **Recently, 300 units were repaired and opened for their former tenant families.** In all the New Orleans public housing projects, these 300 units here are the only ones which have been formally re-opened. Why? Many believe it was a kind of compromise gesture to let steam off the growing opposition to closing and demolishing this very good housing stock.



- **Our host for this tour of B.W. Cooper is Sam Jackson,** who is a leader of the community's struggle to get the whole project re-opened. He lives here, and is now moved into his old apartment, which is one of the 300 units that have been re-opened. Sam is a carpenter and handy-man, and he came on the second visit to Asia. *"I came to life after the storm"* Sam says.
- **It's the 4th of July holiday,** and the re-occupied parts of the B.W. Cooper Project are one big party, with kids playing in the wide open grassy areas, people out visiting each other and making barbeque. Several families invite us into their apartments to taste some treat, meet their families and to see their apartments, which they are very proud of and clearly very relieved to be living in again, after this long time.

4th of July Community Picnic and watching the fireworks on the levee at Holy Cross Neighborhood.

So lovely to see people celebrating together, like this, at the quiet street which ends at the levee. Everyone arriving on foot, hugging each other, talking, carrying some dish to contribute to the feast (American "pot-luck" style): macaroni salad, potato salad, barbecued ribs, cornbread, cakes, etc. Seems like such a good sign of returning life to this neighborhood.



Visit to Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance (MIRA) in Biloxi, Mississippi

In the morning, we drive south, along the Mississippi coast to the town of Biloxi, which received the direct brunt of the Hurricane Katrina. The waves and storm swept inland, tearing down houses and trees like the tsunami.

- **The Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance (MIRA),** which is run by Vicky and Elvis Cintra (who came to Thailand and Indonesia on the second visit), is a small NGO which works to support mostly Hispanic and Vietnamese immigrant workers (both legal and "undocumented" workers) in the area, who work in industries, shipping, ports, construction and fisheries and are often badly exploited, under-paid, dismissed without



being paid, forced to live in appalling conditions, even physically abused, etc. Before the storm, there were 20 - 30,000 immigrant workers in Biloxi + 10,000 Vietnamese fisheries people - only half of them have come back.

- **Since the storm, MIRA's work has increased exponentially**, as many, many Hispanic workers (both legal and illegal) have been flooding into the storm-damaged areas to take up rebuilding and repair jobs. In many cases, because these workers will work for less wages than the local people, they are the target for a lot of exploitation by employers, and for resentment and violence by the local people who see them as taking away their jobs and driving down wages.
- **A lot of rebuilding resources and support in the area are not going to affected people in poorer areas who really need it**, but to wealthier neighborhoods that were only mildly affected by the storm, and to casino-building and coastal-businesses. Plus, a lot of people are being pushed out by the big economic forces of the new casino gold rush on the Mississippi coast. These companies are buying up land from people who can't afford to rebuild.
- **The STEPS coalition** : MIRA is networking closely with several other local groups, such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement for Colored People), lawyers and civic groups to resist the focus on casino and luxury condo-redevelopment and to get the rebuilding resources to those who really need them - and they have had some significant victories so far in getting these funds unlocked.

Visit to the small, rural community of Pearlington, Mississippi

Reverend Frederick Fields, of the Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church, came on the second exposure trip to Asia. This tiny community of only 1,800 people is typical of the small, rural coastal communities that were badly destroyed by the Hurricane Katrina, but which have received very little relief or rebuilding support from the government. Most houses totally flooded and knocked over by the tidal waves.

- Like in Biloxi, the community here is finding that those living in affluent areas with money and property are getting compensation, but those living in poor, backward areas like Pearlington
- Big "Down Home Southern Cooking" - the women of the newly-rebuilt church prepared us a huge and delicious lunch with fried catfish, cornbread, fried greens and shrimp, stewed sweet potato, fried chicken, etc.



Farewell Dinner and Strategy Meeting, at Hope House in New Orleans

To discuss the next steps in the Asia - New Orleans exchange process.

- Some of the participating local groups join us and Tiffany helps organize a discussion of each groups strengths and weaknesses, and what they feel they have to offer each other, locally.
- The Thai and Indonesian delegates are emphatic in suggesting that there is a great need for some serious, full-time, professional coordinating role in New Orleans, to support all these groups (individually) and to work on bringing them together into a network, through joint activities, meetings, etc. This kind of role was EXTREMELY important in both countries after the tsunami. Without it, people would have struggled in isolation. NESRI may try to do fund-raising to support this role.



"Tsunami survivors share stories of rebuilding"

by Richard A. Webster

This is a story which appeared in the New Orleans CityBusiness Newspaper, July 9, 2007

NEW ORLEANS — A small group of villagers from Thailand and Indonesia gathered in the middle of Chartres Street in the Holy Cross neighborhood. They stared at the red "X" spray painted on the front of a boarded-up home as activist Sam Jackson explained the meaning behind the numbers next to the symbol. "This is the date the rescue workers came," Jackson said. "And this is the number of bodies found inside the home."

Afrizal, 34, stared at the house, then proceeded down the block where empty homes outnumbered occupied ones by at least six to one. On Dec. 21, 2004, a tsunami decimated much of Thailand and Indonesia. The storm killed all but 80 of the 800 villagers in Afrizal's Indonesian home of Lam Manyang, including his entire family. "It was horrible and came very suddenly," he said through an interpreter. "We went through the tsunami and the people of New Orleans went through Katrina. We have the same story and the same sadness and the same spirit to rebuild. The only resources we have left are our spirits."

The delegation came to New Orleans as part of a cooperative effort between the National Policy and Advocacy Council on Homelessness (NPACH), the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) and the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI). Over the past year, two groups of New Orleanians traveled to the tsunami-devastated region while two groups from Thailand and Indonesia came to the Crescent City.

Tom Carton, NPACH New Orleans director, said the council is drawing on the knowledge the Thai and Indonesian people gained in organizing community groups during the post-tsunami rebuilding process. "The way they've structured and organized communities is so strong because they've brought so many people into the process by forming linkages between the different groups, within the system and between the villages," Carton said. "It gives them a strong voice when negotiating policy with government officials and the ability to create large numbers, whether to demonstrate or write letter campaigns. We're trying to take that model and reproduce it in New Orleans."

'This is our land' In December 2004, the most devastating tsunami in recorded history hit Thailand, Sri Lanka, India and Indonesia, according to the National Institute of Oceanography. The giant wave, caused by an earthquake in the Indian Ocean with a magnitude of 9, killed 350,000 people and destroyed 2.5 million homes.

Maitree Jongkrajug, 34, lives in the village of Ban Nam Khem in Thailand where the tsunami killed 1,500 of 4,200 villagers, including his father. Jongkrajug's bloodshot eyes betray the memories of that terrible day. He whispers as he describes the devastation but grows louder when talking about the people's fight to protect their land from the Thai government and encroaching developers. "This is our land," he said. "Everyone in Thailand has fought the government for their right to stay on their land."

Each member of the Asian delegation expressed the same sentiment, which is why they do not comprehend why hundreds of thousands of New Orleanians have not returned home. Jongkrajug said 2,000 of the 2,700 survivors are back in his village and have rebuilt 1,200 of the 1,500 homes with the help of private and nonprofit donations and government aid.

Saiful, 46, lost his entire family to the tsunami, which spared only 140 of the 1,400 people who lived in his Indonesian village of Cot Lamkuweh. Yet the survivors refused to relocate and are dedicated to rebuilding. "It is surprising," he said when asked about his impressions of the New Orleans recovery. "We know this is a big expensive task. But it seems like in America, money is not the problem; governmental policies are the problem. We encourage the people of New Orleans to band together and fight for their rights and their ability to come back to their individual homes as quickly as possible."

Taking risks : Jamnong Jitnirat, 48, works for a Thai non-profit organization dedicated to helping tsunami victims rebuild and fight any attempts by the government to appropriate their land. The best way for the people to prevent this from happening is to refuse offers to relocate, he said. People who live on their land make it extremely difficult for outsiders to encroach.

This is the mistake too many people of New Orleans have made, Jitnirat said. "Because so many people didn't stay around their place of origin, the rehabilitation is slow."

When you leave, the further you go the chances of returning and rebuilding your community is less and it's confirmed in the communities we've seen here in New Orleans," Jitnirat said. "We realize the government here and the Thai government have the same mentality. They want to implement big redevelopment plans and chase away the poor. But the difference is if you don't fight or you move away, the chance of returning is gone."

Carton said the Asian ability to remain on their tsunami-devastated land is the difference between First and Third World countries. "It's the coping mechanisms of the developed and developing countries," he said. "Our living standards are higher. We have higher demands. Those folks, they can do that, stay on their land right after the tsunami. Their educational system and health care system were probably vastly underdeveloped before the tsunami, so there wasn't too much of a change. But they believe the people of New Orleans still need to be here and take that risk."

Sitting in the lobby of the Ambassador Hotel on Tchoupitoulas Street, thousands of miles from his small Indonesian village, Afrizal watched as tourists filled paper cups with free coffee, shuffling in and out of the front doors with shopping bags, backpacks and digital cameras.

"It's very surprising," he said of the slow recovery of New Orleans. "America is a big country, a strong country and yet this isn't being dealt with properly. The only way it's going to get fixed is through the efforts of the people themselves. So we encourage the people of New Orleans to get together and push the government to fix the situation. "We know that when there's a huge disaster in a country far away, America sends aid and they come in and they help. But then when it's right here, things don't seem to be happening."