# ***Superdome: Haven Quickly Becomes an Ordeal***

NEW ORLEANS, Aug. 31 - The sick and the disabled were the first to be led out. But late Wednesday afternoon, as the slow evacuation of the Superdome began, it was not always easy to distinguish them from the rest of the 20,000 or more storm refugees who had steeped for days in the arena's sickening heat and stench, unbathed, exhausted and hungry.

They had been crammed into the Superdome's shadowy ramps and corridors, spread across its vast artificial turf field and plopped into small family encampments in the plush orange, teal and purple seats that rise toward the top of the dome.

They had flocked to the arena seeking sanctuary from the winds and waters of Hurricane Katrina. But understaffed, undersupplied and without air-conditioning or even much lighting, the domed stadium quickly became a sweltering and surreal vault, a place of overflowing toilets and no showers. Food and water, blankets and sheets, were in short supply. And the dome's reluctant residents exchanged horror stories, including reports, which could not be confirmed by the authorities, of a suicide and of rapes.

By Wednesday the stink was staggering. Heaps of rotting garbage in bulging white plastic bags baked under a blazing Louisiana sun on the main entry plaza, choking new arrivals as they made their way into the stadium after being plucked off rooftops and balconies.

The odor billowing from toilets was even fouler. Trash spilled across corridors and aisles, slippery with smelly mud and scraps of food.

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"They're housing us like animals," said Iiesha Rousell, 31, unemployed after four years in the Army in Germany, dripping with perspiration in the heat, unable to contain her fury and disappointment at being left with only National Guardsmen as overseers and no information about what might lie ahead.

Once inside the dome, refugees were told that for their own safety they could not leave -- the flood waters climbed four feet up the walls outside -- and many likened the shelter to a prison.

Michael Childs, 45 and a housepainter, went a step further.

"It's worse than a prison," said Mr. Childs, who knew something about the subject, having spent three months in the Orleans Parish Prison on a drunken-driving charge. "In prison you have a place to urinate, a place for other bathroom needs. Here you get no water, no toilets, no lights. You get all that in prison."

On Wednesday afternoon, federal emergency management workers and National Guardsmen began escorting the sickest residents out of the arena. By late evening, when the evacuation paused, 700 people had been removed from the dome. The authorities said they were being taken to other places in the state.

Officials said they hoped to resume their work on Thursday, using hundreds of school buses and municipal buses to take the rest of the refugees to the Astrodome in Houston, on a ride lasting more than six hours. Rest stops were planned at Baton Rouge, Lake Charles and Beaumont, Tex.

If there was little comfort in the prospect of trading one sports arena for another, there was hope waiting in Houston, where Texas officials promised showers, food, medical care and perhaps most important, the freedom to come and go through a system of passes. At a news conference, Judge Robert Eckels, chief executive of Harris County, which owns the Astrodome, offered assurances that it was "not a jail."

At the center of the dome, the field looked like a sprawling military aid station, littered with casualties from a major battle. Families huddled together on scraps of cardboard and torn sheets of vinyl ripped off the lower walls of the stadium. A few stretched out on cots. Piled beside them were plastic shopping bags and suitcases, holding a few clothes. Some people had arrived with nothing more than what they were wearing.

A humid, dusky haze hung over the football field, pierced by three angular shafts of light, as if from an old biblical movie, streaming through holes that the storm tore in the rubbery white fabric covering the dome.

Desperation was in the air. Danielle Shelby tugged at a reporter's arm. "I have a handicapped daughter," she said. "She's over there with her wheelchair. She's hot. We don't have any water. I'm afraid she's going to have a seizure."

Others crowded around. "I've been in the food line twice, and every time I get to the front they tell me they don't have any left," said Juanita McFerrin, 80.

"My husband has cancer," another woman said. "He's not getting his regular treatment."

Frank L. Jones, 54, said he had gone four days without his asthma medicine. Lionel Valentine, 53, who breathes with the help of an oxygen machine, wanted to know if his family would be split up again as they were moved from the dome.

It got worse. Ms. Rousell recalled hearing a loud bang Tuesday afternoon as the body of a man slapped the concrete at the edge of the football field in a fatal suicidal plunge, after he apparently learned that his home had been destroyed. Others told of fights that broke out in food lines, and of a husband and wife who slugged each other in a wild argument.

Several residents said they had heard of children being raped, though it was not clear whether anyone reported such incidents to the authorities, and no officials could be found who could confirm the accounts.

Darcel Monroe, 21, a bakery cashier, stammered hysterically as she recounted seeing two young girls being raped in one of the women's bathrooms. "A lot of people saw it but they were afraid to do anything," she said. "He ran out past all of us."

Many said they felt they had been dumped and abandoned in the stadium. There were no television sets to allow them to follow the rescue efforts, or learn when they might get out.

"One guard would say we're going, another would say we're not," said Malachi Johnson, 23, a forklift operator. "One says the water is rising, another says the water is going down. We don't know what to believe."

As the storm struck early Monday, families were often separated. Some took shelter, while others stayed behind to guard houses. Still others decided the hurricane would not be that serious and ended up being rescued. But no one was helping families reunite, they said.

Brenda Smith, 42, a homemaker, said she had been unable to find her teenage daughters, Britney and Jessica. They had gone to stay with a sister of Ms. Smith's in a housing project that had been surrounded by floodwaters.

"I know they were in the project, and I know that the project was evacuated," Ms. Smith said. "But I don't know where they are, and I don't know who to talk to. I've walked around the whole Superdome twice."

She was eager to get out of the dome, Ms. Smith said, but not looking forward to being shipped to some distant holding center. "I would like to know something about my daughters before I go anywhere," she said, as she rested her head on a scrap of cardboard near the 35-yard line.

Kiki Bell, who is 29 and manages two shops, one selling lace, the other offering herbal remedies, worried about being sent away from New Orleans. "What's going to happen to our jobs?" she asked. "How can we take care of our families?"

Teenagers stuck in the dome tried to make the best of it. Two pickup squads of about 20 players, shirtless and barefoot, battled in a rather loosely structured game of touch football Wednesday afternoon, ignoring the heat. Some of the boys took the barrel-like foam rubber padding off one of the goalposts and turned it into a tackling dummy, crashing into it with powerful, smashing lunges.

The younger children found their own diversions. Around the 30-yard line, two cousins, Ken Juan Smith, 2, and Joseph M. Smith, 3, chased each other in meandering circles, shrieking when they collided and later playing catch with empty plastic water bottles.

No one in the dome seemed happy. But some were able to overcome their discomfort, frustration and anger to reflect on the larger issue of having survived.

"I just thank God," said Ms. Smith, who despaired at finding her daughters before taken to some far-away shelter. "This has been awful. But it's better than being out there in the wind and the rain and that rising water."

Maureen Balleza contributed reporting from Houston for this article.