# **Trapped in the Superdome: Refuge becomes a hellhole**

By

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NEW ORLEANS — A 2-year-old girl slept in a pool of urine. Crack vials littered the restroom. Blood stains the walls next to vending machines smashed by teenagers.

The Louisiana Superdome, once a mighty testament to architecture and ingenuity, became the biggest storm shelter in New Orleans the day before Katrina’s arrival Monday. About 16,000 people eventually settled in. Within two days, it had degenerated into unspeakable horror. A few hundred were evacuated from the arena yesterday, and buses will take away the remaining people today.

“We pee on the floor. We are like animals,” Taffany Smith, 25, said as she cradled her 3-week-old son, Terry. In her right hand she carried a half-full bottle of formula provided by rescuers. Baby supplies are running low; one mother said she was given two diapers and told to scrape them off when they got dirty and use them again.

At least two people, including a child, have been raped as the arena darkened at night. At least three people have died, including one man who jumped 50 feet to his death, saying he had nothing left to live for.

The hurricane left most of southern Louisiana without power, and the arena, which is in the central business district of New Orleans, was not spared. The air conditioning failed immediately, and a swampy heat filled the dome.

An emergency generator kept some lights on but quickly failed. Engineers have worked feverishly to keep a backup generator running, at one point swimming under the floodwater to knock a hole in the wall to install a new diesel fuel line. But the backup generator, too, is faltering and is almost entirely submerged.

There is no sanitation. The stench is overwhelming. The city’s water supply, which had held up since Sunday, gave out early yesterday, and toilets in the Dome became inoperable and began to overflow.

“There is feces on the walls,” said Bryan Hebert, 43, who arrived at the dome Monday. “There is feces all over the place.”

The Superdome is patrolled by more than 500 Louisiana National Guard, many of whom carry machine guns as sweaty, smelly people press against metal barricades that keep them from leaving, shouting as the soldiers pass by: “Hey! We need more water! We need help!”

Most of the refugees are given two nine-ounce bottles of water a day and two boxed meals: spaghetti, Thai chicken or jambalaya.

One man tried to escape yesterday by leaping over a barricade and racing toward the streets. The man was desperate, National Guard Sgt. Caleb Wells said. Everything he was able to bring to the Superdome had been stolen. His house likely has been destroyed, his relatives killed.

“We had to chase him down,” Wells said. “He said he just wanted to get out, to go somewhere. We took him to the terrace and said: ‘Look.’ “

Below, floodwaters were continuing to rise, submerging cars.

“He didn’t realize how bad things are out there,” Wells said. “He just broke down. He started bawling. We took him back inside.”

The soldiers — most are sleeping only two or three hours a night, and many have lost houses themselves — say they are doing the best they can with limited resources and no infrastructure. But they have become the target of many refugees’ anger.

“They’ve got the impression that we have everything and they have nothing,” 1st Sgt. John Jewell said. “I tell them: We’re all in the same boat. We’re living like you’re living. Some of them understand. Some of them have lost their senses.”

Thousands of people still are wading to high ground out of the flooding, and most head for the Superdome. Officials have turned hundreds away.

“The conditions are steadily declining,” Maj. Ed Bush said. “The systems have done all they can do. We don’t know how much longer we can hold on. The game now is to squeeze everything we can out of the Superdome and then get out.”

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin said yesterday that more than 100 buses are staged outside the city for today’s evacuation. He had asked officials in Baton Rouge and Lafayette to send all their school buses — about 500 — to New Orleans. If all of the buses make it into the city, Nagin said, the Superdome could be cleared out by nightfall tonight.

Most of the people will go to Houston, where they will stay in the Astrodome. Others will be taken to Louisiana cities that escaped the hurricane.

From 400 to 500 people, many with critical medical conditions, were airlifted or bused yesterday from the sports complex; some were taken to Houston.

“They need to see psychologically that this is real,” Nagin said. “They need to see that they are really moving. They need to see people getting on the bus. I want to start to create a sense of hope.”

That will be difficult. There is a local legend that sports teams that have called the Dome home have fared poorly because the facility, which broke ground in 1971, was built atop a cemetery. Perhaps, some said yesterday, the curse is real.

Inside, a man coughed blood and his shoulders quaked as he was wheeled through the halls. Thousands clutched their meager belongings, sitting in seats normally used for football games or lying on the Astroturf field, its end zones still painted with the word “Saints.”

Some slept outside on the terrace, trying to get shade under a National Guard truck. Young boys who had lost their shoes hopped on the hot pavement to save their scalding feet. Grown men discarded their clothes and walked around in their briefs.

“People started shooting last night,” said Stacey Bodden, 11.

Bodden and six relatives fled their homes in the West Bank — which survived the storm in relatively good condition — to ride out the storm in the Superdome. By last night, the family had had enough and was going to try to get out and walk home, through the floodwater and across the Crescent City Connection, a massive bridge spanning the Mississippi River.

Her uncle, David Rodriguez, 28, said he heard at least seven shots Tuesday night and saw one man running past him with a gun. “Don’t shoot,” he told the man, who did not.

“This is a nuthouse,” said April Thomas, 42, who fled to the dome with her 11 children. She has enlisted the older boys to take turns walking patrols at night as the rest of the family sleeps.

“You have to fend people off constantly,” she said. “You have to fight for your life. I wake up in the morning, and the first thing I say is: ‘Where are my babies? Is everyone here?’ “

There’s a thriving black market; the most popular items are cigarettes, which sell for $10 a pack, and anti-diuretics, which allow people to avoid using the bathroom for as long as possible.

Many of the injured, the elderly and the critically ill, and those suffering from dehydration, have been taken across a walkway to an adjoining sports center, the New Orleans Arena.

One man was lying part way on a cot, his legs flopped off the side, a forgotten blood-pressure monitor still attached to his right arm. Some had wrapped plastic bags on their feet to escape the urine and wastewater seeping from piles of trash. Others, fearing the onset of disease, had surgical masks over their mouths. An alarm had been going off for more than 24 hours, and no one knew how to turn it off.

Suddenly, incongruously, the first notes of Bach’s Sonata No. 1 in G Minor, the Adagio, pierced the desperation.

Samuel Thompson, 34, is trying to make it as a professional violinist. He had grabbed his instrument — made in 1996 by a Boston woman — as he fled the youth hostel Sunday where he had been staying in New Orleans for the past two months.

“It’s the most important thing I own,” he said.

He had guarded it carefully and hadn’t taken it out until yesterday afternoon, when he was able to move from the Superdome into the New Orleans Arena, far safer accommodations. He rested the black case on a table next to a man with no legs in a wheelchair and a pile of trash and boxes, and gingerly popped open the two locks. He lifted the violin out of the red velvet encasement and held it to his neck.

Thompson closed his eyes and leaned into each stretch of the bow as he played mournfully. A woman eating crackers and sitting where a vendor typically sells pizza watched him intently. A National Guard soldier applauded quietly when the song ended, and Thompson nodded his head and began another piece, the Andante from Bach’s Sonata in A Minor.

Like most in the shelter, Thompson’s family in Charleston, S.C., has no idea where he is and whether he is alive. Thompson figures he is safe for now and will get in touch when he can. Meanwhile, he will play, and, once in a while, someone at the sports complex will manage a smile.

“These people have nothing,” he said. “I have a violin. And I should play for them. They should have something.”