

During the Celebrations: World Habitat Day 2009

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This October 5th, the United States government has teamed up with UN Habitat to celebrate World Habitat Day, with the theme of 'Planning our Urban Future.' Both the President and the Secretary of HUD have stated "America has always been strongest when we work in partnership to build communities that are vibrant, durable and inclusive." All parties involved express great concern about the urban poor during this day, and recognize the obvious: adequate housing is central to human wellbeing.

But during the day of celebration, more than a thousand people are likely to lose their home to foreclosure in the United States, the majority of poor residents from New Orleans remain displaced, public housing is threatened by more demolitions despite the growing homelessness crisis, and most people shut out of the private market face inadequate and humiliating options.

Despite these stark realities, there is no indication that HUD will announce today that it will stop bulldozing people's homes in public housing around the country or that the White House will declare a national housing emergency and ensure that the ongoing foreclosures cease until a more rational solution can be found. On the contrary, on this day of celebration in Washington D.C., we will continue to see more and more homes without people and people without homes.

In July of 2009, UN Habitat sent an advisory group of experts to New Orleans on a fact finding mission on forced evictions. The international group met people living in abandoned buildings, saw piles of rubble where homes used to be in public housing complexes bulldozed by HUD, talked to people with rental assistance who couldn't find a place to live because no landlord would take their vouchers, and visited those who literally ended up under the bridges and any other place they could put down their meager belongings because they no longer had any home at all.

On October 22-November 8, the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing is also undertaking a mission in the United States indicating that housing rights are so imperiled the situation requires international monitoring. This is the reality of habitats in the United States, and one that is more fitting for a day of mourning and reflection than celebration.

Better yet, let's consider holding off on the celebrations until people in the United State have a guarantee of a secure and stable home, and instead make World Habitat Day a day of action and a day of making resolute commitments to change the shameful state of housing in America today. And when President Obama visits New Orleans later this month, we suggest he meet with local resident groups, such as Mayday New Orleans, so he can truly work in partnership and build communities that are vibrant, durable and inclusive.

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