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Michelle Thomas and her daughters, A'Shanti and Maia in their rental house in Abita Springs, La. The family was displaced from New Orleans by Katrina. (AP photo)

Holidays Stressful for Katrina Victims

Thousands homeless months after disaster

For three months after Hurricane Katrina's waters consumed her home, Michelle Thomas locked her stress deep inside and put on a brave face for her husband and two daughters.

She focused on the positive: Her Ninth Ward home was destroyed and her hospital job was gone, but her husband and children, ages 7 and 16, were alive and the family was together.

Then came Thanksgiving, celebrated in her mother's cramped home in a small Louisiana town. Since then, the family has moved into a modest rental house they owned in a community an hour from New Orleans. As Christmas approaches, the 36-year-old woman is feeling anything but joyful. Like many survivors, Thomas has the blues.

"I go into a feeling of hopelessness, and I cry," she says.

The holiday season may make dealing with Katrina's fallout even tougher, mental health experts say, especially when there are few doctors, counselors or hospitals to help people deal with the loss of homes, jobs and lives.

"It's almost like a shotgun blast as opposed to a single bullet to social stability," said Bryan Gros, a Baton Rouge psychologist who works for the Mental Health Association of Louisiana. "People are having a

hard time."

Thousands remain homeless along the Gulf Coast, where the hurricane hit Aug. 29 and killed more than 1,300 people. It ripped apart families and communities, and wrecked businesses.

About half a million people — both survivors and the emergency workers who went to their aid — may need mental health services, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates.

Seven percent of Louisiana residents have sought psychological counseling as a result of the storms, according to a survey by Louisiana State University, and 53 percent reported feeling depressed. A Katrina crisis hot line in Mississippi got 1,100 calls in its first two months, said Tessie Smith, spokeswoman for the state's mental health department.

Before Katrina, the National Suicide Prevention hot line got an average of about 3,000 calls a month from all over the country. Since the storm, monthly calls have more than doubled — 7,000 in October alone — with most new calls coming from Katrina-affected areas, said spokeswoman April Naturale.

Gros said suicides have spiked in Baton Rouge, and New Orleans coroner Dr. Frank Minaryard who reviewed two suicide cases in one recent week fears more as the Christmas holiday nears.

"We don't have our medical system here. It's gone. That's a big problem," Minaryard said. "I think it's going to end tragically for some of our citizens, not only here, but who are spread out all over the country."

Racism Blamed for Slow Aid

Emotions flare as black survivors testify

(AP)— Black survivors of Hurricane Katrina said Tuesday that racism contributed to the slow disaster response, at times likening themselves in emotional congressional testimony to victims of genocide and the Holocaust.

The comparison is inappropriate, according to Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla. "Not a single person was marched into a gas chamber and killed," Miller told the survivors.

"They died from abject neglect," retorted community activist Leah Hodges. "We left body bags behind."

Angry evacuees described being trapped in temporary shelters where one New Orleans resident said she was "one sunrise from being consumed by maggots and flies." Another woman said military troops focused machine gun laser targets on her granddaughter's forehead. Others said their families were called racial epithets by police.

"No one is going to tell me it wasn't a race issue," said New Or-



New Orleans' resident Leah Hodges cries while telling Congress that Katrina victims "died from abject neglect." (AP photo)

leans evacuee Patricia Thompson, 53, who is now living in College Station, Texas. "Yes, it was an issue of race. Because of one thing: when the city had pretty much been evacuated, the people that were left there mostly was black."

Not all lawmakers seemed persuaded.

"I don't want to be offensive when you've gone through such incredible challenges," said Rep. Christopher Shays, R-Conn. But referring to some of the victims' charges, said "I just don't frankly believe it."

"You believe what you want,"

Thompson said.

The hearing was held by a special House committee, chaired by Rep. Tom Davis, R-Va., investigating the government's preparations and response to Katrina. It was requested by Rep. Cynthia McKinney, D-Ga., a member of the Congressional Black Caucus.

"Racism is something we don't like to talk about, but we have to acknowledge it," McKinney said. "And the world saw the effects of American-style racism in the drama as it was outplayed by the Katrina survivors."

Baghdad Police Academy Attacked

New round of kidnappings feared

(AP)— Two suicide bombers detonated explosives inside Baghdad's main police academy Tuesday, killing at least 43 people and wounding more than 70, police said. Al-Qaida in Iraq claimed responsibility for the attack, the capital's deadliest in months.

The bombing came as Al-Jazeera aired an insurgent video claiming to have kidnapped a U.S. security consultant — the seventh Westerner abducted in Iraq since Nov. 26 — and the U.S. military reported another American soldier killed in a roadside bombing in Baghdad.



U.S. military personnel on alert after bombers detonated explosives inside Baghdad's main police academy in Iraq. (AP photo)

Late Tuesday, another suicide bomber blew himself up in a cafe frequented by police in a Shiite neighborhood, killing three people and wounding 20, police said. One of the dead and three of the wounded were policemen, officials said.

The assault on the police academy was carefully planned to maxi-

mize casualties, all of whom were police officers or cadets. The first bomber struck near a group of students outside a classroom, a U.S. military statement said.

U.S. and Iraqi officials have warned of an increase in insurgent attacks ahead of the Dec. 15 elections. Residents of Ramadi reported seeing fliers Tuesday in the name of al-Qaida in Iraq warning people not to vote and threatening to bomb polling stations.

Also Tuesday, the U.S. military said a soldier assigned to Task Force Baghdad was killed when a patrol hit a roadside bomb Sunday. At least 2,129 members of the U.S. military have died since the Iraq war started in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count.

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