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Hope Glimmers in New Orleans

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NEW ORLEANS -- Workers here were picking up trash Sunday, a small miracle under the circumstances. The airport opened to cargo traffic. A bullhorn-wielding volunteer led relief workers in a chorus of "Amazing Grace."

Nearly two weeks after Hurricane Katrina's onslaught, Sunday was marked by signs that hopelessness was beginning to lift in this shattered city. While the final toll from the disaster remains unknown, there were indications New Orleans had begun to turn a corner.

"You see the cleaning of the streets. You see the people coming out," said volunteer Norman Flowers. "The people aren't as afraid anymore."

Later in the day, President Bush began his third visit to the city since the hurricane, landing on a warship that was assisting in recovery efforts and visiting with firefighters.

Flowers, deployed by the Southern Baptist Convention, stood in the bed of a pickup truck on Canal Street, leading police, firefighters and relief workers in song, punctuated by the exuberant honk of a fire truck nearby.

"This is a sign of progress," said New Orleans resident Linda Taylor, gesturing at the impromptu gathering. "Last Sunday, I couldn't find any church services. This Sunday, people have gathered together to worship."

Numerous residents were able to visit their homes for the first time, however briefly, as floodwaters receded and work crews cleared trees, debris and downed telephone poles from major streets.

Albert Gaude III, a Louisiana State University fisheries agent, was among those returning for the first time since the storm. "They wouldn't let us in before, but we made it now and we could drive all the way here with no problem," he said.

The Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport reopened for cargo traffic Sunday, and limited passenger service was expected to resume Tuesday, airport director Roy Williams said.

Williams said he expects about 30 departures and arrivals of passenger planes a day -- far below the usual 174 -- at the airport, where a week ago terminals became triage units and more than two dozen people died.

Authorities raised Louisiana's death toll to 197 on Sunday, and recovery of corpses continued. Teams pulled an unspecified number of bodies from Memorial Medical Center, a 317-bed hospital in uptown New Orleans that closed more than a week ago after being surrounded by floodwaters.

Trash collection began over the weekend, a service unimaginable in the apocalyptic first days after Katrina's fury battered the Gulf Coast and broke holes in two levees, flooding most of New Orleans.

Mayor C. Ray Nagin was asked NBC's *Meet the Press* whether New Orleans could stage Mardi Gras in February 2006. "I haven't even thought that far out yet," he said. But he added, "It's not out of the realm of possibilities.... It would be a huge boost if we could make it happen."

Nagin declined to say when the city might be drained of floodwaters.

"But I always knew that once we got the pumps up, some of our significant pumps going, that we could accelerate the draining process," he said. "The big one is pumping station six, which is our most powerful pump, and I am understanding that's just about ready to go."

The city's main wastewater treatment facility will be running by Monday, said Sgt. John Zeller, an engineer with the California National Guard. "We're making progress," Zeller said. "This building was underwater yesterday."

David Smith, a volunteer firefighter from Baton Rouge, said it's a sign of progress that people like him are now in New Orleans aiding the city's recovery. "We are helping people get the medicine they need," Smith said. "People who haven't been able to get prescriptions filled. That's a big step forward."

Army Lt. Gen. Russel L. Honore, the commander of active duty troops engaged in hurricane relief, told CNN's *Late Edition* the number of dead would be "a heck of a lot lower" than dire initial projections of 10,000 or more. Recovery of corpses continued Sunday.

On CBS' *Face the Nation*, Honore asked Americans to take care of hurricane evacuees and help reunite them with their families. "And there's light at the end of the tunnel here," he added.

Throughout the shattered city, many of the thousands of the troops and relief workers paused to reflect -- some to mark the fourth anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, some simply because it was Sunday. At a Sept. 11 memorial service in the Algiers neighborhood, firefighters from New York told their colleagues they understood the pain and frustration wrought by Katrina.

"I just want to see what's going to happen tomorrow. And tomorrow after that," said Capt. Mike Donaldson, a New Orleans firefighter who attended. "It starts looking up from here."

Step by small step, residents tried to re-establish pieces of the city's inimitable character.

Kenny Claiborne has been running what has become known as Radio Marigny from his front porch -- no actual radio signal, only generator-powered speakers that carry music by local groups through the breeze down Chartres Street.

"We just got that feeling like, it's not the end anymore, it's the beginning now," he said.

Tommy Hendricks, who owns a small apartment house in the French Quarter, returned to his ground-floor apartment and found it damaged by squatters who took refuge there -- empty bottles and clothes strewn about.

"It's on life support," he said of his neighborhood, "but it's not dead."