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By Jerome Reide and Stephen J. Wermiel, issue editors

The devastating images of the tsunami that hit Southeast Asia in 2004 and of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita that hit the Gulf Coast in 2005 remain vivid nightmares for many people. The impact of these natural disasters on the rule of law is much less visceral, but the role that rule of law and human rights principles can and should play in the recovery process deserves attention.

The media have focused their attention on the impact that Hurricanes Katrina and Rita had on the criminal justice system in the Gulf states. However, if the criminal justice system in New Orleans and elsewhere is to return to its predisaster capacity, there must be a greater spotlight on the slow pace of recovery and on how the system is struggling to provide basic due process and other constitutional rights—even more than eighteen months after winds and flood waters destroyed records, emptied jails, and soaked courthouse corridors.

This issue of *Human Rights* provides some updates on these efforts, both with a look at the current state of public defender efforts in New Orleans to provide representation to criminal defendants and with a look back at the experience of some lawyers and judges after the storm.

We have not even attempted to tackle the myriad problems facing the civil courts, which involve the dual challenges of returning to full operation and sorting through the vast morass of legal claims left in the rubble.

This issue also attempts to examine natural disasters from other perspectives. We consider the role that international human rights protections designed to afford rights to internally displaced persons should play. This is important in the context of the nation’s response to the hurricanes, in which overwhelming racial concerns have been raised about whether the very slow response by governments at all levels was and continues to be because a high percentage of those affected are African American. We also have considered what happened in New Orleans from the standpoint of environmental justice.

The rights of internally displaced persons are also critical in considering whether other nations and the world community have responded adequately to the sweeping destruction of the tsunami. To what extent have rights to shelter, food, and education been honored? To what degree has a right of return been recognized? These are vital concerns for us all.