

Katrina evacuees say it's no time for Mardi Gras

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW ORLEANS—A number of Hurricane Katrina refugees stuck in hotel rooms and unfamiliar surroundings across the United States are in no mood to party and they're decrying this city's plans to hold Mardi Gras celebrations in two months.

"This is not the time for fun, this is the time to put people's lives back on track," said Lillie Antoine, a 51-year-old refugee stuck in Tulsa, Okla. Hurricane Katrina's cultural and economic wrecking ball came on the eve of what promised to be one of the most exuberant parties in this party city's history—the 150th anniversary of Carnival parades in New Orleans.

Carnival is shaping up to be

an oddity. The cash-strapped city is seeking corporate sponsors for the first time to pay for police overtime and the time-consuming cleanup along parade routes and the French Quarter. Also, the two-week Carnival season—which climaxes on Fat Tuesday, the day before the Lenten season—was scaled back to eight days.

And now the city's Carnival cheerleaders are coming under fire from refugees and black organizations for being insensitive to the plight of so many displaced New Orleanians.

"I just think it sends the wrong message to have a celebration when people are not back in their houses," said Ernest Johnson, the Louisiana president of the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People.

The turmoil over Carnival was sparked last Saturday at a town hall meeting in Atlanta when Mayor Ray Nagin came under fire by an angry and raucous crowd of refugees for approving to hold Mardi Gras.

Nagin then told the crowd that he had actually opposed celebrating Mardi Gras but that tourism leaders forced his hand and got their way.

His comments stunned Carnival supporters back in New Orleans, who said they had been assured by Nagin that he was unequivocally in favor of going forward with the festivities.

"He's like John Kerry—he was for it and then he was against it," bemoaned Ed Muniz, the captain of Endymion, one of the city's biggest and most glamorous parades.

Ernest Collins, the city's arts and entertainment director, said the mayor made his Atlanta comments "in the heat of the moment" and that Nagin knows how important



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A float honoring Louis Armstrong is only one among many during the wild and flashy Mardi Gras celebration.

"The reality is that the right message is not getting out to America," said J. Stephen Perry, president of the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau. "Mardi Gras is far more than a party, it's a celebration of who we are."

Perry charged that Nagin had not done enough to market Mardi Gras as pivotal to the revitalization of the city and its economy.

Johnson, the state NAACP president, dismissed that argument.

Hotel and tourism businesses, he said, are "only interested in lining their own pockets." He added that he would support Mardi Gras only if the hotels "go out and dedicate 100 percent of their proceeds to rebuilding their community."

Darius Gray, the head of the Greater New Orleans & Lodging Association, said that "profits are hard to come by these days" for hotels and that many hotels have spent large sums on repairing dam-

Please see KATRINA/4B

Overeaters support groups at all-time high



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ALBANY, N.Y.—Grabbing a handful of cookies off the plate, stealing a roommate's food, overeating while home alone. These could be signs of compulsive overeating.

In the United States, the nation's fixation on weight is only making the disorder more prevalent, experts say. The number of support groups for people whose lives are controlled by food has grown sharply in recent years.

Jim M., a member of Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous in Saginaw, Mich., tells a typical story.

"I didn't have that switch that says, 'You've had enough.' I just always wanted more and more and more," said the former college football player, who like other 12-step program members wouldn't allow the use of his full name.

Jim's obsession was so great he constantly broke off social engagements to eat giant piles of food in the privacy of his home.

"I just always made food my priority," he said.

Since 1998, the number of support groups hosted by Food Addicts has grown from about 20 to 300 nationwide. Overeaters Anonymous, founded in 1960, now has more than 4,300 meetings in the country.

David Levitsky, a professor of psychology and nutrition at Cornell University, said compulsive overeating is becom-

ing more widespread in part because the country has a growing obsession with weight loss. Dieters make a religion of calorie-counting, starving themselves until their bodies rebel with a binge.

That sets off an ensnaring cycle of guilt, dieting and binge-eating, he said.

"More people nationally are going on diets. And there's always going to be a certain fallout of people who can't define when enough is enough," he said.

Binge-eating disorder is more prevalent than anorexia or bulimia, according to the National Association of Anorexia and Associated Disorders. A study by the American Psychiatric Association in 2000 suggested between 0.7 percent and 4 percent of the population suffered from the disorder, but researchers believe the actual figure is much higher, said Annie Hayashi, spokeswoman for NAAAD.


Even thin people and those of average weight can be possessed by binge eating, said Susan L., who chairs the group Food Addicts.

"Not all overeaters are obese, and not all obese people are overeaters," she said.

The only unifying characteristic is an overwhelming preoccupation with food, she said.

The behavior of compulsive overeaters is distinct from the average person who might indulge in normal "emotional eating"—like curling up with a carton of ice cream after a breakup or taking comfort in macaroni-and-cheese on a blue day.

Those in the throes of a binge feel they cannot stop and they eat until they are physically uncomfortable, according to Overeaters Anonymous.



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