

People Uniting to Save Algiers, New Orleans

By [Michael Steinberg](#)

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Region: [USA](#)

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People are uniting from near and far to save the Algiers neighborhood in New Orleans. Algiers is located on the west bank of the Mississippi River across from downtown. Like other west bank communities, it was not flooded in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and remains dry.

Longtime community activist Malik Rahim, an Algiers resident, has been rallying his neighbors to remain in their homes and organize to save their community, and thus far they have been successful in doing so.

Over the past few days several groups of supporters have arrived in Algiers to provide food, water and medical aid. Roger Benham of Willimantic, CT came south with Food Not Bombs members from Hartford, CT a few days ago. Benham said he hooked up with some other folks carrying a van full of medical supplies, and the group made its way into Algiers at about noon today. Benham is a trained medical first responder.

"We went to Covington first," Benham said in a phone interview with this reporter at about 5:15 p.m. New Orleans time today. Covington, LA is on the north shore of Lake Ponchartrain. "Veterans For Peace has a camp there and has been feeding people. After the Red Cross arrived there was some tension because the Red Cross tried to take control, I was told.

"Veterans For Peace came into Algiers yesterday," Benham reported. "We went on the causeway across Ponchartrain into the city today. We had to go through a checkpoint but got through OK. We made our way into Jefferson Parish." From there, Benham said, they took an alternative route into Algiers.

Benham said his group and Veterans For Peace are working with Malik Rahim's group Act Out Now to provide relief supplies and support to the Algiers community. "We set up a medical station in the Masjid Bigal mosque on Teche Street," Benham said. He reported that there were some corpses laid out at another location, but had not seen them.

Benham also reported that the area is under martial law and is being patrolled by the US Army's 5th Cavalry. "They're acting OK so far," he said. "I hear they're better than the National Guard, which got here last night around curfew. When they were here there was a lot more tension."

He also said the authorities have called for a voluntary evacuation of Algiers, but have not declared it mandatory thus far. During the interview he said he was seeing a number of utility trucks working to get the electricity back in operation.

Benham said there was currently still a strong military presence, and several times during the brief interview he had to pause because helicopters were flying over. "I've also seen people from Blackwater Security and Instar," he reported. These are two private security companies that have armed personnel in Iraq. The deaths of two Blackwater personnel in Fallujah provided the pretext for the first US attack on that city.

"There's a 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew in effect," Benham said. Shortly thereafter he said he had to go and quickly ended the interview.

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