FEATURE-Ravaged by Katrina, New Orleans still wary of levees

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By Jeffrey Jones

NEW ORLEANS, May 1 (Reuters) - As a New Orleans firefighter, Randy Cookmeyer stayed on the job as Hurricane Katrina slammed the city on Aug. 29. It was four days before he could go home, and by then he had to moor a boat to the rain gutter of his garage to retrieve clothes for his two sons.

"I climbed up on my roof, cut a hole and got in through the attic because the water was up to the second-floor windows," Cookmeyer said outside his home, three blocks from where the storm surge ripped a 455-foot (140-metre) hole in the 17th Street Canal levee, which devastated the west part of town.

But he has pushed ahead with renovation despite the ruin that still marks the area. He gutted his home, treated the studs for mold and installed new drywall and kitchen cabinets.

He admits it is partly an act of faith, despite assurances from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that the region's 350-mile (565 km) levee system will be back to pre-Katrina strength by the start of the 2006 hurricane season on June 1.

"It doesn't mean there will be a hurricane June 1, it's just the hurricane season," said Cookmeyer, 40. "So hopefully they continue working and make the levees better than they ever were, because it affected a lot of people."

It still does. Eight months after failed levees played a major role in America's worst natural disaster, more than half New Orleans' pre-storm population remains scattered across the country and entire tracts of neighborhoods are debris fields.

In other parts of south Louisiana, such as St. Bernard and lower Plaquemines parishes, virtually no structures were spared damage from Katrina, then Hurricane Rita nearly a month later.

As the storm season looms -- one forecasters predict will be active -- integrity of the levees is an overriding concern for residents and politicians as the region rebuilds.

RACING TO FIX DAMAGE

Under its Task Force Guardian initiative, the Corps is racing to finish $798 million of repairs to 169 miles (272 km) of all-important earthen, steel and concrete flood barriers, most of which were built in the 1960s.
More than $4 billion of major long-term improvements are being planned but Washington has yet to approve the funding and the first stage is not slated to be done until Sept. 2007.

Today, cranes and earth-moving equipment dot the south Louisiana landscape. By late April, repairs were nearly three-quarters done, said Corps spokesman John Fleshman.

"This work would normally take maybe 18 months or two years, and we're doing it in six months, so it's definitely compressed," Fleshman said. "For that reason among others we brought on quality control people and so has the contractor."

Various engineering groups blamed failures during Katrina on such factors as soil erosion and settling along floodwalls and poor design and maintenance by the Corps and contractors.

A key improvement now is temporary 70-ton gates at the mouths of three outfall canals in the north part of New Orleans on Lake Pontchartrain, including the 17th Street Canal. They will be closed during severe storms to guard against surges.

But pumping capacity is restricted in the canals, making it hard to pump out vast volumes of rainwater when the gates are closed, the Corps concedes.

Robert Bea, an University of California, Berkeley, civil engineering professor who is part of a National Science Foundation team overseeing the project, said the Corps appears on track to meet its own target. But he's wary of the target.

"People will sometimes get into too big a rush to meet a goal that is not really meaningful, and we've seen signs of that," Bea said. "While things may be back to pre-Katrina condition, obviously the pre-Katrina condition was not satisfactory for Katrina, so the concern is over the rush to meet this potentially very meaningless goal."

SOME AREAS STILL VULNERABLE

Depending on a hurricane's strength -- Katrina came ashore as a category three in a five-level scale -- areas near the navigable Industrial Canal in east New Orleans still face risks that levees could be overtopped, Corps officials said.

Veteran contractor Ron Wimprine visited the Lakeview area recently to inspect a damaged home his daughter was considering buying. Standing on a street lined with gutted houses, he said residents should not be overly concerned about levees.

"If they bring the levees back to pre-Katrina and they put the gates up in the front, the levees will definitely hold, because the water's not going to get as deep as it did before." said Wimprine, 68. "So, I feel comfortable."
But it's a different story for the Lower Ninth Ward, the destroyed African American neighborhood that has become a macabre tourist attraction since it was opened to visitors, and the suburbs of New Orleans East.

Ultimately the answer here lies in re-establishing crucial wetlands southeast of New Orleans, a natural barrier that has eroded and been cut up into waterways, scientists say.

In addition, the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet, a little-used shipping route that concentrates storm surges into the city's Industrial Canal, must be closed, Bea said. There are no definite plans to close it yet.

"That effect was underestimated significantly by the Corps when they did the original Lake Pontchartrain protection design criteria," he said. "We know there's a significant hazard there. It needs to be addressed. You better not turn your back on it."