

Katrina relief may dry up giving to other causes

Ralph De La Cruz. *The Sun Sentinel*
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It's a toxic soup, not a mystic river, that Sean Penn is wading through. And Kanye West is talking politics. Without a single rhyme.

Celine Dion is donating a million dollars. Gloria Estefan, Andy Garcia and Arturo Sandoval are taking toys to shelters in Biloxi and Baton Rouge. And the entrance to the Astrodome, the nation's largest homeless shelter, has become the newest red carpet location.

Jamie Foxx. Jada Pinkett Smith. Dr. Phil. Oprah. Anybody who's anybody is there.

It's almost as if caring and charitable giving have replaced owning a Hummer and getting on *MT V Cribs* as the ultimate statement of social standing. We can only hope.

Even Shaquille and Kobe are united on Katrina assistance.

What more can you say?

And us little people have sent money we didn't know we could spare.

According to *The Baltimore Sun*, people are giving at a pace that far exceeds what they gave after 9-11. The Red Cross alone received \$203.8 million in the first nine days after Katrina. That's more than eight times more than in the nine days after the terrorist attacks.

And it's not like we were slackers after 9-11. More than \$2.2 billion was raised.

"People want to feel good," Maria said as she saw yet another celebrity on our TV talking to hurricane survivors.

If you've got to have celebrities and a follow-the-leader culture, having it focus on giving isn't such a bad thing, I suppose.

This is something that's all good. Right?

Well, maybe not.

"I worry for small local charities that don't have the large fund-raising machinery in place," said Rick Cohen, executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. Cohen says educational, arts and culture, and some public policy groups probably will be affected

most.

Makes sense.

Most of us, both as individuals and businesses, have tight budgets. When we suddenly have to funnel money into one area, it comes from some other place. Particularly now, at a time when saving by Americans is at an all-time low.

So we see the heart-wrenching images of devastated lives. Maybe there's some national guilt as well at seeing the black community deserted -- again. And we want to do something.

We salve our guilt by quickly scrawling out a check to the Red Cross or Salvation Army, and feel as if we've done our part.

Unfortunately, when the smaller local charities come calling later this year, the philanthropic well might be dry.

"It applies to corporate giving as well," Cohen said. "If you have a company that says, 'We're pledging a million dollars to disaster relief,' well, a good chunk of that is probably going to come out of what they give to some other group."

The timing couldn't be worse. Not only did this catastrophe occur when most charities are putting together their big holiday fund-raising drives, but also when skyrocketing gas prices have already put the pinch on budgets.

"That's why, when you're talking about huge natural disasters," Cohen said, "you really have to get back to the question of, 'What's the role of the government when it comes to these disasters?'"

The American public has mobilized because our government did not move quickly or strongly enough to do the one thing it's supposed to do: Protect Americans.

Problem is, when American companies and everyday citizens have to take on the responsibility and expense of doing what government should be doing, somebody's going to get shorted.

The social inundation from Katrina is likely to be with us longer than flooded streets.

And as with the wind and rain, the ones who will feel it most will be the poor and the powerless.

Ralph De La Cruz can be reached at rdelacruz@sun-sentinel.com or 954-356-4727.

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