POLITICS ASIDE, NEW ORLEANS A LOST CAUSE:

Why is Hurricane Katrina back in the news? Because journalists of color cast it as a racial issue on June 28, 2007, during the All-American Presidential Forum, attended by eight contenders for the Democratic nomination.

I agree that the tragedy has a racial dimension made worse by administrative bungling. I just wish that one of the Democratic contenders had been forthright, calling the Katrina tragedy a natural disaster, and recognizing that the displaced people are the most visible group of climate refugees since the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s.

The U.S. climate is warming steadily and rapidly. As a result, the ocean is expanding, glaciers are melting and hurricanes may be getting stronger. Hence, during storms, the edge of the sea reaches higher each year. Simultaneously the surface of the Mississippi delta plain is sinking lower each year because of compaction of clay-rich soils and the land-sliding of giant blocks into the Gulf of Mexico. These vertical movements are being compounded by the horizontal retreat of coastal wetlands, which buffer the power of storms before they reach New Orleans' doorstep. Meanwhile, the water level in the channel of the Mississippi River during floods is rising because the channel is confined by levees.

The brutal geological reality is that people of every color left New Orleans as climate-related refugees. I believe that the real reason New Orleans remains unfixed -- without police and fire protection and with vacant hospitals -- is because objective visionaries and smart money sees such rebuilding as a risky, if not wasteful war against nature.

None of the eight Democratic contenders at the forum said anything close to this. Rather than commit political suicide, they instead exploited the tragedy's compelling secondary issues such as race, financial greed and bureaucratic incompetence. Politics works best when moral judgments, blame or strategies are involved. A rational yielding to nature's greater power inspires only a few voters of my persuasion.

The question that precipitated this column was asked by journalist Michel Martin and addressed to Sens. Joe Biden of Delaware, Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York, Christopher Dodd of Connecticut and Barack Obama of Illinois; former Sens. John Edwards of North Carolina and Mike Gravel of Alaska; Rep. Dennis Kucinich of Ohio and Gov. Bill Richardson of New Mexico. "Would you support a federal law guaranteeing the right to return to New Orleans and other gulf regions devastated by Hurricane Katrina based on the United Nations human rights standards governing the internal displacement of citizens?"

Those answering yes were Kucinich, Gravel, Dodd and Richardson. Avoiding the question were Clinton, Edwards and Obama.

Biden said no, claiming that we do not need to involve the United Nations. In spite of their nuanced answers, all eight Democratic contenders support massive rebuilding. Sen. Dodd, reflecting the feelings of them all, said of New Orleans: "This is an American city. Anywhere else in America, we'd want to step up and see to it that people would get that help."

Of course most Americans would want to help. But perhaps the politicians need reminding that nearly 200 Alaska native villages exist on disappearing deltas and shorelines. In New Orleans, the soils are subsiding. In Newtok on the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta, the soils are melting. New Orleans is being flooded by the rising sea. Shishmaref on Alaska's northwest coast is being washed away.
Why don't the politicians guarantee the Yupik and Inupiat residents of these villages the right to remain on their deltas forever using the type of no-holds-barred, taxpayer-funded, and hard engineering of New Orleans? Why is the race card not being played up north? Why is the Bush administration not being blamed for the melting subarctic?

The answer is because there is no political gain in blaming nature for rising sea levels, with or without our contribution to global warming.

Kucinich would guarantee jobs below sea level in New Orleans. Richardson would force insurance companies to insure properties near America's most unmanageable river. Clinton would offer a 10-point plan.

My plan has only one point. That we not spend another dime on U.S. properties below sea level -- and use that money instead to help sea-level refugees find safer homes elsewhere.