Hurricane Katrina Slams Into Gulf Coast; Dozens Are Dead

By JOSEPH B. TREASTER and KATE ZERNIKE  AUG. 30, 2005

NEW ORLEANS, Aug. 29 - Hurricane Katrina pounded the Gulf Coast with devastating force at daybreak on Monday, sparing New Orleans the catastrophic hit that had been feared but inundating parts of the city and heaping damage on neighboring Mississippi, where it killed dozens, ripped away roofs and left coastal roads impassable.

Officials said that according to preliminary reports, there were at least 55 deaths, with 50 alone in Harrison County, Miss., which includes Gulfport and Biloxi. Emergency workers feared that they would find more dead among people who had been trapped in their homes and in collapsed buildings.

Jim Pollard, a spokesman for the Harrison County emergency operations center, said many of the dead were found in an apartment complex in Biloxi. Seven others were found in the Industrial Seaway.

Packing 145-mile-an-hour winds as it made landfall, the storm left more than a million people in three states without power and submerged highways even hundreds of miles from its center.

The storm was potent enough to rank as one of the most punishing hurricanes ever to hit the United States. Insurance experts said that damage could exceed $9 billion, which would make it one of the costliest storms on record.
In New Orleans, most of the levees held, but one was damaged. Floodwaters rose to rooftops in one neighborhood, and in many areas emergency workers pulled residents from roofs. The hurricane's howling winds stripped 15-foot sections off the roof of the Superdome, where as many as 10,000 evacuees took shelter.

Some of the worst damage reports came from east of New Orleans with an estimated 40,000 homes reported flooded in St. Bernard Parish. In Gulfport, the storm left three of five hospitals without working emergency rooms, beachfront homes wrecked and major stretches of the coastal highway flooded and unpassable.

"It came on Mississippi like a ton of bricks," Gov. Haley Barbour said at a midday news conference "It's a terrible storm."

President Bush promised extensive assistance for hurricane victims, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency was expected to be working in the area for months, assessing damage to properties and allocating what is likely to be billions of dollars in aid to homeowners and businesses.

In Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi, the governors declared search and rescue their top priority, but they said high waters and strong winds were keeping them from that task, particularly in the hardest-hit areas.

The governors sent out the police and the National Guard after reports of looting, and officials in some parts of Louisiana said they would impose a curfew.

Hurricane Katrina was downgraded from Category 5 -- the most dangerous storm -- to Category 4 as it hit land in eastern Louisiana just after 6 a.m., and in New Orleans officials said the storm's slight shift to the east had spared them somewhat. The city is below sea level, and there had been predictions that the historic French Quarter would be under 18 or 20 feet of water.

Still, no one was finding much comfort here, with 100 m.p.h. winds and water surges of up to 15 feet. Officials said early in the day that more than 20 buildings
had been topped.

"I can't say that we've escaped the worst," Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco said. "I think there is still damage that can be inflicted on the city. We don't even know what the worst is."

Preliminary damage estimates from the hurricane -- which raked across southern Florida last week as a Category 1 storm before reaching the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico and making its run at the Gulf Coast -- ranged from $9 billion to $16 billion. Only Hurricane Andrew, which ripped through parts of Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi in August 1992, was costlier -- with nearly $21 billion in insured losses.

Beyond the property damage caused by flooding and the high winds, Hurricane Katrina also dealt a blow to the oil industry and the lucrative casinos that have been the economic engine for the region. Both oil production on offshore platforms and gambling in the string of casinos that dot the Mississippi Gulf Coast shut down on Sunday as the storm approached.

Since Friday, oil output in the Gulf of Mexico has been cut by 3.1 million barrels. Closing the casinos cost Mississippi $400,000 to $500,000 a day in lost tax revenue alone, and Mr. Barbour said officials had not yet been able to determine the extent of damage to the casinos.

The storm pounded New Orleans for eight hours straight. Flooding overwhelmed levees built to protect the city from the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, sending muddy water swirling into the narrow streets downtown. On the southern shore of the lake, entire neighborhoods of one-story homes were flooded to the rooflines, with nearby off-ramps for Interstate 10 looking like boat ramps amid the waves.

Along the lake were snapped telephone poles, trees blocking roads and live wires scattered over the roads. In one cabin, a family was cooking a chicken dinner over charcoal briquettes on a hibachi. They had lost power like everyone else in the area.
Windows were blown off condominiums, hotels, office buildings and Charity Hospital, sending chards of glass into the winds. Fires broke out despite torrential rain, some ignited, the authorities said, by residents who lighted candles after the electricity went out.

The storm knocked out telephone and cellular service across swaths of the gulf region, and officials in New Orleans said parts of the city could remain without power for weeks.

Two nuclear plants near the path of Hurricane Katrina appear to have weathered the storm without major damage, and a third shut down on Saturday, in anticipation of the hurricane, according to Entergy Nuclear, which owns all three. The extent of damage to the plant that shut down, Waterford, 20 miles west of New Orleans, was still unknown late Monday afternoon because the wind was blowing too hard to go out and look, said Diane Park, a spokeswoman.

The more sparsely populated parishes east of New Orleans, meanwhile, got hit much harder than anyone had expected.

Ms. Blanco said Plaquemines, Orleans, St. Bernard, Jefferson and St. Tammany Parishes had been "devastated by high winds and floodwaters." In St. Bernard, the emergency center was submerged, and officials estimated that 40,000 homes, too, were flooded.

Parish officials reported in early afternoon that many residents had been driven to their roofs.

Officials estimated 80 percent of New Orleans residents had obeyed the order to evacuate. But in areas that had been expecting less damage, officials were worried -- and annoyed -- that large numbers of people tried to ride out the storm.

In Plaquemines and Terrebonne Parishes, south and west of the city, officials said they were particularly concerned about commercial fisherman who had decided to remain on their boats.
"My biggest concern is the loss of life," said State Senator Walter J. Boasso. "We have a lot of people down there hiding in their attics, and I don't know if we will get to them fast enough."

In Mississippi, Mr. Barbour said many people suffered from what he called "hurricane fatigue," deciding not to evacuate this time after having done so in the past only to be spared.

"We pray that those people are O.K.," he said. "But we don't know."

In Diamondhead, Miss., Don Haller and his 17-year-old son, Don Jr., were left clinging to the remains of their house when a 23-foot surge of water hit it, flexing the roof like a deck of cards.

They had decided against evacuating, Mr. Haller said, judging the storm "just a lot of rain."

"We rode the house," Mr. Haller said, emerging from the waters here, his son carrying their dachshund, Kuddles.

Mr. Barbour said casinos along the coast near Biloxi and Gulfport had been hit by surges of more than 20 feet. But casino workers could not reach them to survey the damage, he said, because U.S. 90 had "essentially been destroyed."

Along the coast in Mobile, Ala., 150 miles east of New Orleans, thousands of evacuees from Mississippi and Louisiana were filling shelters and the hotels that had remained open.

The lowest-lying areas of Mobile and Baldwin Counties in Alabama were evacuated on Sunday night. By noon, areas south of Interstate 10 were already flooding, and the storm surge was pushing the water toward the city of Mobile and Mobile Bay as the hurricane progressed.

Downtown Mobile, which is right on the bay, was severely flooded by Monday afternoon, the water pushing down the main streets around the county courthouse and lapping at the sandbagged doors and windows at the Mobile Museum. Water
all but covered a number of street signs and parking meters, and large, heavy planters and some newspaper boxes floated down the streets.

The main hotels in the city were just a block or two from the worst flooding, causing concerns that they, too, would be flooded, at least in the main floors. And as power and phone lines went down, evacuees were getting restless.

Paul Weir said he had not left his home in Meraux, La., just outside New Orleans, during a storm since Hurricane Betsy in 1965, and left on Sunday morning only after hearing that Hurricane Katrina was a Category 5. He drove with his wife, daughter and four friends to Mobile; with roads clogged with other residents fleeing, what is normally a three-hour drive took 12.

By Monday afternoon the family was obsessing about what they would find when they got home.

"If I was home, I would've went on a roof for two days just like everybody else," said Susan Weir, Mr. Weir's wife, said. "I'd rather be in that situation than here, honestly. This is expensive and I've only got a credit card with a $2,000 limit."

At the Ramada Hotel in downtown Mobile, Edith Frieson sat anxiously in a soggy room wondering why her husband had not returned. "He left maybe three hours ago to go down and see if he could check the house," said Mrs. Frieson, who lives on Dauphin Island, a narrow barrier island south of Mobile. The island was already flooding on Sunday afternoon.

Like most storms, Hurricane Katrina weakened as it came onshore, and by Monday evening the National Hurricane Center had downgraded it to a tropical storm. The center of the storm had moved its heavy rains toward Jackson, Miss.

But state officials said the hurricane had been an unusually large one, causing a wide swath of damage, and they expected to be dealing with damage for days if not weeks.

In Louisiana, Ms. Blanco pleaded with residents who had evacuated not to
rush back.

"The roads are flooded, the power is out, the phones are down and there is no food or water, and many trees are down," she said.

"Wherever you live, it is still too dangerous for people to return home," she continued. "If you evacuated and you're in a shelter, if you're with friends and family, please, please stay there. Stay safe."

Michael D. Brown, the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, reminded people that most injuries from hurricanes occurred after the storm had passed.

"Be careful," Mr. Brown said, standing next to the governor at a news conference. "Don't get in that water. Watch for downed power lines. If you're going to use a chainsaw, know how to use a chainsaw. If you're going to have a generator, know how to exercise and operate the generator. Be very, very careful. The storm is not over."

Mr. Brown also discouraged fire and emergency agencies outside the storm area from sending in crews unless they had been asked.

Even before the hurricane hit the New Orleans area, FEMA had positioned 23 of its disaster medical assistance teams and 7 search and rescue teams around the region. It also delivered generators, and stockpiles of water, ice and ready-to-eat meals. It even sent in two teams of veterinarians to provide care to any injured pets or other animals.

As of early Monday, about 52,000 people were in 240 shelters in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Florida and Texas, with the majority in the Superdome in New Orleans.

Joseph B. Treaster reported from New Orleans for this article, and Kate Zernike from Montgomery, Ala. Reporting was contributed by Abby Goodnough in Mobile, Ala.