

Hurricane Katrina bears down on New Orleans

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29 August 2005

Residents of New Orleans, Louisiana braced Sunday night for a potentially catastrophic hurricane headed for the southern US city. On Friday August 26, seven people in southern Florida were killed, four struck by uprooted trees, by the category three Hurricane Katrina as it scraped the coast and moved west. Once into the pocket of the Gulf of Mexico, the hurricane gained strength and bore directly toward the antiquated and impoverished city of New Orleans.

Early Sunday, August 28, the hurricane was upgraded by the National Weather Service to category five, the strongest possible storm. Category five storms are capable of winds in excess of 200 miles per hour and a storm surge of 35 feet, as with Hurricane Camille in 1969.

As has happened so often in the past, the most vulnerable layers of the city will be most at risk as the hurricane approaches. It is expected to hit New Orleans sometime Monday morning. On Sunday afternoon, the city's mayor, Ray Nagin, ordered a mandatory evacuation of the city, an unprecedented step. Many thousands remain behind, unable to leave for lack of transportation, because they are too sick or for other reasons. Lines stretched out of the Louisiana Superdome, which is being used as a temporary shelter, but an unknown number of residents remain in their homes.

More than 100,000 of the nearly half a million residents lack vehicles, and were without means to heed the calls to evacuate. Traffic was at a standstill with outgoing traffic filling all four lanes of the west- and northbound Interstates.

The National Hurricane Center issued a statement on Sunday saying the hurricane had reached "potentially catastrophic" strength. In addition to New Orleans, other regions along the Gulf Coast, including parts of

Alabama and northern Florida, are on guard. If Katrina hits ground as a category five storm, it will be only the fourth storm of this strength to hit the United States since records have been kept.

"We are facing a storm that most of us have long feared," said Nagin on Sunday. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime event." However, very little has been done by city officials to prepare for what has been seen as inevitable.

The city of New Orleans was settled on soft, silty, low-lying land that sinks at an average rate of three feet per century. In 2005, the city stands at eight feet below sea level, although some neighborhoods are twenty feet below sea level. Flanked by the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River and the shore of Lake Pontchartrain, New Orleans is extremely vulnerable to inundation during hurricane season.

Water that pours into the city during a hurricane's surge must be pumped out at great effort and cost over the very levees built to hold back the water. Near misses in the last few years prompted engineers and meteorologists to issue warnings and recommendations to rebuild crumbling barrier islands and develop emergency shelters before the inevitable next strike.

Computer simulations of a category four hurricane striking New Orleans projected more than twenty feet of standing water made into a cesspool by chemical spills, the flotsam of destroyed homes, and even caskets washed out from the city's enormous historic cemeteries.

In 1965, Hurricane Betsy, a category three storm, submerged almost half of New Orleans, leaving 60,000 residents homeless. The death toll for the Gulf region reached 74, prompting calls for better preparedness plans and flood barriers.

Of the residents remaining, a feeling of profound,

almost surreal anxiety prevailed. The *World Socialist Web Site* received updates from New Orleans residents as the situation developed Sunday.

Judith, who suffers from chronic back pain, wanted to leave her Warehouse District apartment but had nowhere to go, and no one to help her leave. Her apartment is on the third floor of a concrete building built in 1911, three blocks from the east bank of the Mississippi River. “It survived Betsy and Camille,” she said. She is hopeful that if the river floods, the massive Morial Convention Center between her home and the river will shield her neighborhood from the brunt of the surge.

“Myself and a few neighbors are here for the duration. I just couldn’t see being trapped in bumper-to-bumper traffic with no set destination for who knows how many hours. The gas stations along the evacuation route are sooner or later going to run out of gas and then we’re screwed on the road.”

She described the dysfunctional and dream-like town as she saw it Sunday morning: “All but two gas stations along Magazine Street were closed; all the businesses are closed with boarded up windows. There were people riding their bicycles and a man selling the Sunday paper on Saint Charles Avenue like it was a regular Sunday. What I did notice is that most of the businesses with hanging store-front signs left them out to flap around and turn into missiles.”

Judith has considered the alternatives to staying in her apartment. She told the WSWS, “Supposedly, the National Guard is set up in the Superdome along with emergency supplies. I’m a ten-minute walk from the French Quarter full of fancy hotels with alleged back-up generators. I’m hoping that if and when the power goes, I can make my way over to one of them just to sit tight once the storm passes.”

She is highly critical of the conduct of city officials and considers them partly to blame for the potential human catastrophe tomorrow. “The city, parish, and state should have started the contra-flow on the highways early Saturday. That probably would have gotten me to leave town... But then again, I don’t have \$100 plus a night for a room.”

The teenage son of a doctor who had badly wanted to leave town declared, “We didn’t evacuate. I’m in Memorial Hospital right now and I’m hoping that’s enough. We couldn’t leave because my dad was on

call. I hope I don’t die. Seriously.”

Like many residents left in New Orleans, he was skeptical of the integrity of the city’s scant emergency precautions in the face of a record hurricane. “This is like the biggest storm that’s ever been in the Atlantic. I don’t know. They’re saying the storm surge might be around 25-50 feet, and the levees only support 7 feet.”

He told the WSWS, “There are a good number of people [camped in the hospital], but they’re mostly calm and watching TV. Most people have left, because this is obviously going to be a huge storm, but the TV still shows a few people, and one of my friends is still in town. It’s just scary.”

Kas, a long-time resident of New Orleans, related her immense uncertainty Sunday afternoon. “By this time in the AM, we’ll be in the storm and by this time tomorrow, we may not be here at all. It is hard to fathom words like Catastrophic Damage—the sun is shining and the wind is currently mild. It’s 92 degrees. It’s a perfect summer day.”

When Hurricane Andrew hit Miami, Florida in 1992, Kas was terrified that New Orleans was next. “I am reminding myself that anything is still possible. I am preparing as much as possible though the only real thing you can do in this situation is either stay and pray or run and pray for those who didn’t. So I’m praying... that this thing weakens, that it turns a little more, that I still have a roof come tomorrow afternoon, that the speed it is picking up will hold so at least if it does hit, it will move through quickly. We’ve always been told here to fear the water not the wind, but these winds are moving at 175 miles per hour—a far cry from the 75-90 that we know not to be too worried about.”

Then she became almost despondent, reflecting on whether or not she would be alive tomorrow. “I live in a flood zone. This area was under water with Betsy and Camille. I am afraid and okay at the same time.”



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