

Texas and Louisiana coast menaced by Hurricane Rita

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23 September 2005

Hurricane Rita is the second giant storm in three weeks to threaten the United States along the Gulf Coast. The same basic features of American society that so shocked the nation and the world following Hurricane Katrina are again on display: the enormous social inequality, the decay of public infrastructure, the indifference, incompetence and lack of preparation of the American ruling elite.

As of Thursday evening, the eye of Rita was expected to hit the coast of Texas or western Louisiana some time late on Friday night or early on Saturday morning. Tropical force winds extend for a radius of 350 miles, and the hurricane will likely cause extensive destruction from Corpus Christi, Texas to the south and west, all the way to New Orleans, Louisiana to the north and east. In some areas the damage may be catastrophic.

With sustained winds of 170 miles per hour Thursday morning, Hurricane Rita was a Category 5 storm and the strongest hurricane ever measured in the Gulf of Mexico. It grew extremely rapidly after passing Florida, feeding off the unusually warm waters of the Gulf. It has since softened slightly, and is expected to hit landfall as a Category 3 or 4 hurricane, with winds up to 150 mph.

Hurricane Katrina, which devastated much of New Orleans and coastal Mississippi, hit land on August 29 as a Category 4 storm. With heavy rain beginning to fall on New Orleans as a result of Rita, there is the possibility that the damaged levee system will give way again. Officials have said that even three inches of rain could lead to major flooding in the already devastated city. The death toll from the earlier hurricane has now topped 1,000 and is still rising.

According to a report in the *Washington Post* Wednesday, scientists at Louisiana State University's Hurricane Center have concluded that the levees protecting the city did not fail because the storm surge overtopped the barriers, but rather because of faulty design and inadequate construction. This inadequate levee system, which will likely not be rebuilt even to its previous level until sometime next year, will experience a further blow from Rita.

One of the cities facing the gravest threat is Galveston, Texas, which lies on a coastal island some 40 miles east of Houston. Much of the city is only 8 feet above sea level, and is protected by a 17-foot high sea wall. This will be easily overpowered by an expected storm surge of over 20 feet, and even higher waves.

"It will inundate the entire city," Don Van Nieuwenhuise, a geologist at the University of Houston, told the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. "The whole island will be under water." The area

throughout the Galveston Bay—from Galveston through Texas City and up to La Porte, adjacent to Houston—could face enormous damage.

Galveston's protective boundary, constructed after the great hurricane of 1900, is thoroughly inadequate to handle a storm as massive as Rita. The storm of that year, the deadliest natural disaster in US history, completely leveled the city of Galveston, killing 6,000 to 12,000 people.

While most of Galveston's 58,000 residents have been evacuated, a thousand perhaps remain. The city's mayor announced Thursday that there are no hurricane-protection shelters available for those who have not left.

Depending on where the hurricane makes landfall, the greatest damage, in terms of loss of life and destruction of homes and buildings, may come in Houston, a city of over 2 million people. The last major hurricane to directly hit the Houston metropolitan area was Hurricane Alicia in 1983, which was barely a Category 3 storm when it made landfall. Alicia killed 21 people and produced massive damage, partially as a result of the 23 tornados that came with it.

An article in the *Houston Chronicle* from February 20 of this year discussed some of the consequences of a major hurricane. Citing models of a Category 4 or 5 hurricane hitting the Texas coast around Freeport, just southwest of Galveston, the newspaper wrote, "Within an hour or two, a storm surge, topping out at 20 feet or more, would flood the homes of 600,000 people in Harris County," which includes Houston. Estimates of the cost of damage from such a storm range from \$40 billion to \$50 billion.

Having not been built to withstand a major hurricane, many homes and buildings in the downtown and residential areas would be severely damaged. "With sustained winds between 131 mph and 155 mph," the newspaper wrote, "the power of a Category 4 storm exceeds that of most building codes. Houston's commercial building rules call for structures to withstand three-second bursts of at least 110 mph, said Dennis Wittry, managing director of Houston Structural Operations at Walter P. Moore, an engineering firm."

However, it would be the less stable homes of working class and poor residents that would be most severely damaged. "You'll definitely see more significant damage in residential construction," Wittry told the *Chronicle*. "Lower-end homes, or some homes in older areas, would probably be completely destroyed." Over 100,000 homes could be wiped out.

Nearly 1.3 million people in the more vulnerable areas of Texas are under mandatory evacuation orders; however, it is not clear how many people will be able to get out, particularly in Houston. The disorganized character of the evacuation plan was on full display Thursday afternoon, as traffic out of the city ground to a halt, with backup 100 miles long.

Tens of thousands of residents were stuck for hours without moving in extremely hot conditions. Many ran out of gas, as a run on fuel stations created a scarcity of gasoline throughout the region. Most gas stations were completely out of gas or had lines of a hundred cars or more. Waits at airport ticket counters for flights out of the city were hours long, with no evidence of preparation for the significant surge of passengers.

As in New Orleans and every other city in the country, a substantial section of Houston's population is impoverished, without means of transportation. The city has a poverty rate of about 20 percent. To these hundreds of thousands of poor people, Houston Mayor Bill White had the same message that New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin had for the people of his city three-and-a-half weeks ago: you are on your own. "There will not be enough government vehicles to go and evacuate everybody in every area," he said on Wednesday. "We need neighbor calling for neighbor."

The evacuation of Houston and the Texas coast is being used as an opportunity to revive the myth that people who stayed in New Orleans willfully chose not to follow evacuation orders. Bush said in a press briefing Thursday that "people have learned to evacuate sooner," and that, unlike in New Orleans, people are heeding the calls of city officials to escape the path of the storm.

In fact, some 100,000 people were stranded in New Orleans to face Hurricane Katrina because they did not have the means to leave the city on their own. It was known beforehand that these residents would be unable to get out, but nothing was done to help them. Many thousands of these New Orleans residents have since been transported to Texas, and are now facing yet another evacuation.

Enormous damage could also be inflicted upon southern Louisiana, especially if the hurricane shifts further to the east, as forecasts were indicating late on Thursday. This region is largely marshland along the coast, but it is still inhabited by 10,000 to 20,000 people. Democratic Governor Kathleen Blanco issued a call for residents to "head north" to escape the storm.

If the storm stalls over eastern Texas, Arkansas or Oklahoma, as is projected, it will cause severe inland flooding and damage.

The effects of Hurricane Rita are already being felt by working people across the country. The Texas coast is home to a quarter of the country's oil refineries and is also the source of much of the country's natural gas. The prices for both energy sources have jumped this week, and gasoline prices have already begun to rise again. Price hikes could be extreme in coming days, depending on the impact that Rita has on the Houston Ship Channel and the oil refineries in the Gulf.

Even before Rita, home heating prices were expected to soar 40 to 80 percent this winter, due to the longer-term surge in natural gas prices. The storm will exacerbate the economic strains faced by millions of Americans

The broader economic impact of the two storms is likely to be

severe. New jobless claims are up sharply, as hundreds of thousands lost their jobs after Katrina hit. The hurricanes could trigger an economic downturn, as consumer confidence plummets and spending falls across the country.

Hurricane Rita provides further evidence of a marked increase in the number and intensity of hurricanes. Rita is the 17th storm this season strong enough to receive a name. Already, this season is the fourth-busiest hurricane season since recordkeeping began in 1851. Rita is the earliest 17th storm in recorded history. With nearly two months to go before the season is over, the number of named storms will almost certainly top the previous record of 21, set in 1933.

In addition to being the most intense storm on record in the Gulf of Mexico, Rita is the third most intense storm ever recorded in the Atlantic Ocean region as a whole.

Many scientists believe that the recent increase in hurricane frequency and intensity is due to global warming, which has raised sea temperatures. Water in the Gulf of Mexico, for example, is currently about 1 degree Fahrenheit above average. Worldwide, global temperatures from June through August were the second highest level for that period on record, continuing a warming trend that has become particularly noticeable over the past decade.

In spite of the growing threat posed by hurricanes, little has been done in any of these regions to fortify homes, develop evacuation plans and otherwise prepare the population for a major storm.

Whatever the damage caused by Hurricane Rita over the coming days, it again underscores the failure of U.S. society to confront these threats in a rational way. The conclusions of scientific investigation have been ignored or undermined by the interests of private profit, as have the social conditions of millions of Americans and the health of the country's social infrastructure.



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