

Hurricane Rita slams Texas and Louisiana, reflooding New Orleans

Patrick Martin
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Nearly 30 people died in hurricane-related accidents even before Hurricane Rita came ashore early Saturday near the Texas-Louisiana border. The huge storm, with hurricane winds along a 350-mile stretch of coastline, threatens a devastating blow to Houston, Texas, the fourth largest US city, as well as severe damage to flood-ravaged New Orleans.

By Friday evening, with hours to go before Rita made landfall, its winds and rain broke levees in New Orleans in several places, reflooding much of the lower Ninth Ward, the working class area which was the hardest hit by flooding after Hurricane Katrina. Streets that had been dried out on Friday morning were under four to six feet of water by nightfall, and there were concerns that more levee breaks and more flooding could take place overnight.

The approach of Rita also forced a temporary halt to the search for dead bodies in homes throughout the devastated city. The death toll from Katrina had reached 841 in Louisiana—the majority in New Orleans—and 1,078 for the Gulf Coast region as a whole.

While the loss of life from Rita will likely be much less, the economic damage could be far greater. The Houston area accounts for \$250 billion in annual output, 2 percent of the US total, making it five times as large as New Orleans. Nearly 40 percent of the US oil and natural gas supply is affected by one or both hurricanes.

In Texas, 24 elderly people died when the bus evacuating them from the Houston area exploded into flames just outside Dallas, which was their destination. A rear wheel reportedly locked up, causing a fire that detonated oxygen tanks being used by many of the evacuees, who ranged in age from 70 to 101.

After the fire erupted, the bus driver pulled 21

passengers to safety before the explosion. All those still on the bus at the time of the blast were trapped and burned to death.

There were other deaths in Texas in the course of the evacuations from coastal areas, which were marked by much the same chaos and lack of preparation in Louisiana before Katrina. An 82-year-old woman died of dehydration while stuck in traffic Thursday, as temperatures reached well into the 90s, exacerbated by the reflected heat from the roadway and the stifling atmosphere of exhaust fumes.

Houston Mayor Bill White and Harris County chief executive Robert Eckels initially implied that nearly all residents should evacuate, but the road system north and west away from the coast was quickly overwhelmed. Hundreds of thousands sat in their cars all day Thursday and into Friday, with many ultimately returning to their homes.

The failure of the mass evacuation was particularly stark because Houston, with its huge concentration of refineries and chemical plants, is supposedly considered a prime target for a future terrorist attack that could release thousands of tons of deadly chemicals. But neither the federal Department of Homeland Security nor the state and local authorities had made any realistic preparation for the evacuation of the area.

By midday Friday, White was publicly urging Houston residents to return to their homes and “shelter in place” rather than risk being caught out on the open road when the hurricane came ashore. “Being on the highway is a deathtrap,” he admitted.

Texas Governor Rick Perry offered military force and religious consolation. He ordered the activation of 5,000 Texas National Guard troops, half of those available to the state after the diversion of forces to

Iraq. Perry, a Republican whose administration relies primarily on the Christian fundamentalist groups, then appeared in the state capital, Austin, safely inland, to give the following message: “Be calm, be strong, say a prayer for Texas.”

While Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) officials claimed that they had “learned the lessons” of Katrina and would not be found wanting in the next hurricane disaster, the actual advance preparations for Rita are extremely limited. FEMA prepositioned a few dozen trucks filled with drinking water and ice and moved 10 FEMA staff members from Washington to just outside the disaster zone.

By far the largest mobilization before the hurricane was conducted by the military, both National Guard troops and regular Army and Navy forces. All 300,000 National Guard troops across the United States were put on alert for possible duty on the Gulf Coast, with three battalion task forces put on call for deployment to Texas immediately after the storm passes. Some 1,400 Texas National Guard troops returned from storm recovery duty in Louisiana to play a similar role in their home state.

Governor Perry of Texas and Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco of Louisiana filed official requests for up to 25,000 additional federal troops, 10,000 in Texas and 15,000 in Louisiana. President Bush signed an executive order declaring the two states disaster areas and authorizing emergency action by a range of federal agencies.

The White House initially planned a Bush visit to the Texas coast on Friday, to provide a presidential photo-op before the hurricane and seek to counter the kind of devastating exposure of administration indifference and neglect which accompanied the Katrina disaster. But the trip was suddenly canceled, on the pretext that Bush’s presence with a large security entourage might be disruptive.

Instead, Bush flew directly from Washington to Colorado Springs, Colorado, where he will monitor the storm and the federal response from the headquarters of the Northern Command. This is the new military command, established after the September 11 terrorist attacks, which controls all land, sea and air forces in the continental United States.

There is more than just symbolism in Bush’s decision to oversee the storm response from a military

headquarters. The Pentagon and the White House have sought to utilize the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, now followed by Hurricane Rita, to advance their efforts to facilitate the use of the American military on US soil.

Long forbidden by the 1878 Posse Comitatus Act, the participation of the regular military in domestic policing operations is to be made routine, and the public accustomed to the sight of heavily armed soldiers—in many cases wearing uniforms and gear more appropriate to desert warfare in Iraq than to storm duty—patrolling the streets of major US cities.



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