

Hurricane Rita causes widespread damage but few deaths

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26 September 2005

Hurricane Rita cut a swathe of destruction across southwestern Louisiana and parts of east Texas Saturday, but no deaths were reported in the coastal areas of either state because of a near-total evacuation of the affected regions. After several dozen deaths during the pre-storm evacuation in Texas, the first 36 hours after Rita made landfall saw only a single death reported, from a tornado in Mississippi, far from the main impact of the hurricane.

The devastating impact of Hurricane Katrina and the chaos and massive loss of life in New Orleans compelled a different societal response to the threat of Hurricane Rita. State and local authorities moved far more energetically to clear the storm-threatened coastline, and the people of the affected region were clearly alert to the danger after witnessing the destruction of New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

While half the local population tried to ride out the storm in Mississippi coastal cities like Gulfport and Biloxi, the mid-size cities in Texas and Louisiana that bore the brunt of the storm—Beaumont, Texas, population 113,000, Port Arthur, Texas, population 58,000, and Lake Charles, Louisiana, population 72,000—had largely been emptied before Rita struck. Cameron Parish, Louisiana was virtually empty by Friday, while 95 percent of the people in Calcasieu Parish (Lake Charles), 190,000 out of 200,000, had moved to safer ground further north.

The remarkably low death toll from Rita was partly due to the storm's being weaker than Hurricane Katrina, which struck southeastern Louisiana and the Mississippi Gulf coast four weeks before. Rita was a category 3 hurricane when it came ashore near the Texas-Louisiana border, compared to category 4 for Katrina. Nonetheless, Rita was still an extremely

powerful storm—one of the ten most damaging in US history, by one estimate.

The storm brought winds of 120 miles an hour or more when it hit the coastline, and the storm surge, while considerably smaller than Katrina's 30-foot wall of water, was so strong that it temporarily reversed the flow of the Vermilion River in southwestern Louisiana, which normally flows south into the Gulf of Mexico. Barges were thrown up on land in Lake Charles, Louisiana, and a bridge on Interstate 10 across the Calcasieu River was hit by a barge and damaged, forcing temporary closure.

More than a thousand Louisiana residents were rescued by helicopters and airboats Saturday, with hundreds still trapped on the roofs or second stories of buildings. One third of Cameron Parish, the low-lying coastal area south of Lake Charles, was under water, and at least a half dozen small towns were erased from the map by the storm surge, which destroyed protective levees. The adjacent coastal area, Vermilion Parish, was also heavily flooded.

Because of its counterclockwise rotation, a hurricane's most damaging winds and strongest storm surge are on its northeastern edge. As a result, the heaviest impact of Rita was felt in southwestern Louisiana rather than east Texas, which is more densely populated and contains a number of huge refineries and chemical plants, which were largely unscathed.

Much of Port Arthur, Texas was under water, however, and high winds caused heavy damage in Beaumont, Texas as well. Both cities were largely evacuated before the storm hit. In an effort to avoid the tragic loss of life among elderly hospital patients and nursing home residents in New Orleans, all such facilities in Port Arthur, Sabine Pass and Beaumont were emptied and their residents airlifted out of the

region before Rita came ashore. Buses and ambulances were mobilized in large numbers, fire department rescue squads worked around the clock, and US Air Force cargo planes were filled with wheelchair-bound passengers.

A similar total evacuation was undertaken in Galveston, Texas, the island city that was initially feared to be the likely landfall before Rita veered east on Thursday and Friday.

All told, the evacuation before Hurricane Rita was the largest single emergency movement of the American population in history. More than 3 million people in Texas and over half a million in Louisiana moved inland from the coast, including an estimated half the population of metropolitan Houston, the fourth largest US city.

The flight from Houston was sparked by dire warnings from city officials, not limited to people living in coastal areas along the Houston ship channel, the artificial waterway that connects the city to Galveston Bay. Mayor Bill White discouraged Houston residents from going to public shelters—reportedly for fear of repeating the scenes from the New Orleans Superdome and convention center. Instead, residents were told either to leave the city or shelter in their homes. The predictable result was gridlock on the highways.

President Bush made a well-publicized visit to the headquarters of the US Northern Command, in Colorado Springs, Colorado, supposedly to supervise the federal response to the natural disaster. But with the exception of the airlift of the elderly from the Beaumont-Port Arthur area, the Pentagon played relatively little role in the emergency response to Hurricane Rita.

The bulk of the work was done by local police, fire and other emergency service workers, and by National Guardsmen mobilized under state authority. A request from the governors of Texas and Louisiana for 25,000 federal troops to supplement the state and local operation was scaled back, then withdrawn. Only 500 active-duty troops were eventually dispatched to the region, plus another 1,750 sailors and Marines on board the USS Iwo Jima.

Despite the distinctly secondary federal role, the Bush administration has sought to use Hurricane Rita as an opportunity to refurbish its political image after the

display of indifference and incompetence in the response to Hurricane Katrina. Bush declared Rita an “incident of national significance” two days before it made landfall. He waited until after the levees broke in New Orleans to make a similar declaration for Katrina. An Army general and a Coast Guard admiral were placed in charge of federal troops and operations of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the region.

Arriving in Colorado Springs, home to Northcom, the new military command established after the September 11 terrorist attacks to control all land, sea and air operations in the continental US, Bush declared, “I’ve come here to watch Northcom in action, to see firsthand the capacity of our military to plan, organize and move equipment to help the people in the affected areas.”

In the wake of the storm, and the relatively successful emergency response—at least compared with Katrina—Bush sought to claim credit for the Pentagon, and make an argument for loosening the legal restrictions on the use of regular military forces for police duties inside the United States. Such deployments are prohibited, under the Posse Comitatus Act, unless a state governor seeks federal aid to suppress a domestic insurrection.

The role of FEMA was also comparatively modest. It mobilized a total of 4,000 workers to Texas, including 14 search-and-rescue teams and several dozen trucks loaded with ice, water and other supplies. The agency’s principal role will not be in direct relief to storm victims, but in handling applications for federal disaster assistance in the rebuilding effort.



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