

Hurricane Gustav threatens New Orleans, Gulf Coast

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As of this writing Hurricane Gustav is bearing down on the US Gulf Coast after its destructive passage through the Caribbean left more than 80 people dead in the Dominican Republic and Jamaica and severe damage and flooding in western Cuba, where the storm, considered the most powerful in half a century, included sustained winds of 150 miles per hour.

On Sunday evening, the US National Hurricane Center said the storm had weakened to a Category 3 hurricane with winds of up to 125 miles per hour, but warned that it could pick up strength by the time it reached the coast. High winds are expected to hit New Orleans shortly after midnight and are due to reach hurricane strength during early morning hours. The hurricane is expected to make landfall west of the city around 2 p.m. local time, with winds reaching 115 miles per hour.

Three years ago, on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina and the flooding that followed the failure of the levee system led to the deaths of nearly two thousand people and an estimated \$90 billion in damage. The storm exposed the negligence of the entire political establishment—from the White House and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to state and local authorities, who were responsible for both the underfunding and poor construction of the levees and the disorganized and incompetent disaster response.

In the face of a similar-sized hurricane, authorities have ordered the evacuation of much of the Gulf Coast, from the Florida-Alabama border to eastern Texas. In all, 11.5 million people are in the path of Gustav, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Much of the Gulf's petroleum industry—which produces 25 percent of US oil and 15 percent of the country's natural gas—has been shut down, leading to predictions of sharp increases in fuel prices.

In New Orleans, Mayor Ray Nagin ordered a mandatory evacuation of the city's more than 239,000 residents and imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew until the storm passed. Anyone who remained, he said, would be subject to arrest if they were found outside of their homes in the evening. At the same time, he said, those remaining would not be able to rely on the authorities for emergency assistance. No city shelters have been designated or scheduled to be open.

Nagin repeated the law-and-order demagoguery of 2005, when officials tried to criminalize desperate citizens searching for supplies due to the official indifference of authorities that left them without food, water and other necessities. Nagin said looters would not “get a pass, this time,” he said, and instead of a temporary stay in a local jail, they would be sent immediately to the notorious Angola State Penitentiary. “You will go directly to the Big House and God bless you when you go there.”

Officials announced plans to relocate 30,000 residents who requested assistance—far fewer than the number who lack means of transportation, not to mention the money to pay for hotels, food and gas. Hundreds being evacuated by the city were forced to wait for hours in the heat at the downtown train terminal, while National Guard humvees circled the crowds.

The mayor acknowledged that large areas of the city were likely to be flooded by storm surges expected to be 10-18 feet. The \$15 billion levee reconstruction project, ordered after Hurricane Katrina, has not been completed. The Army Corps of Engineers has pushed back its completion date to at least 2011.

As of Friday, press reports said that no shelter arrangements had been made for the nearly 7,000 families still consigned to living in flimsy, storm-vulnerable FEMA trailers within the New Orleans

metro area.

The trailers—which sit on cinder blocks and are unsafe in winds higher than 35-40 miles per hour—are a threat to more than their residents. “When this storm hits, those trailers will move around quite a bit,” Nagin warned, adding, “As a matter of fact, most of them will become projectiles and start to fly around the city.”

The Bush administration and FEMA officials, who were discredited by their response to Hurricane Katrina, have sought to assure the population of their concern and preparedness. Both Bush and presidential candidate John McCain have announced they will skip their appearances at the Republican National Convention to coordinate efforts in the storm area.

An editorial Friday in the *New York Times*, noted however, that FEMA has not fulfilled promises of having an emergency housing plan in place for further hurricane damage along the Gulf Coast.

The reconstruction of the New Orleans—which has been characterized by corruption and profiteering by politically connected contractors—has done little or nothing to improve conditions for the working class.

A recent Brookings Institution report noted that affluent areas—the higher-elevation tourist districts such as the French Quarter and surrounding neighborhoods—have seen their populations grow beyond 2005 levels. Many of the low-income neighborhoods that were ravaged by Hurricane Katrina have been left in shambles and largely uninhabitable. As of January 2008, the city’s 8th planning district—containing the destroyed Lower 9th Ward—had recovered only 19 percent of its pre-storm inhabited residences.



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