

US Gulf Coast deals with aftermath of Hurricane Gustav

Kate Randall
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Hurricane Gustav weakened to a tropical depression on Tuesday, with winds slowing to below 35 miles per hour and the storm forecast to cross into northeastern Texas. Gustav made landfall west of New Orleans as a relatively fast-moving Category 2 hurricane on Monday, substantially weaker than some predictions that it might come ashore as a massive Category 4 storm.

The southern coastal Louisiana towns of Morgan City and Houma were hardest hit, with rooftops blown off homes and businesses and widespread power outages. Danger still remained Tuesday of heavy rains, tornadoes and residual storm damage in northern Louisiana, northeastern Texas, eastern Oklahoma and much of Arkansas.

An estimated 1.45 million households remained without power throughout the Gulf Coast, including 300,000 in the New Orleans area. The city's sewage system was also seriously damaged.

Early estimates indicated 8 people had died in the US as a result of the storm, including an elderly couple killed when a tree fell on a house in Baton Rouge and a young man who died when a tree hit his home in Lafayette, Louisiana. Gustav had claimed the lives of as many as 100 in the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Jamaica and caused severe damage in Cuba as it worked its way through the Caribbean.

In anticipation of potentially catastrophic damage, and with memories of the devastation and loss of life as a result of Hurricane Katrina three years ago, close to 2 million people in the Gulf Coast area had evacuated in advance of Gustav. Some 10,000 people had remained in New Orleans, including the homeless, poor people and others unable or unwilling to leave.

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and other local and state officials urged those who had fled to wait a

number of days while services were stabilized. “[Tuesday] is not a day for you to come back to the city of New Orleans,” he said. “We need the streets clear to clear debris, fix power lines and do things we need to so you can come back in.” Nagin added, “Every system—sewer, water, drainage—is on back-up power. Hospitals are on skeleton crews, using back-up generators.”

Sections of the Gulf Coast in Mississippi were still isolated by floodwaters, and Governor Haley Barbour urged residents there not to return until Wednesday.

In response to criticism over the lack of preparation in response to Hurricane Katrina, Mayor Nagin had ordered a mandatory evacuation of the city, and had imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew until the storm passed. About 1,500 New Orleans police officers and an equal number of National Guard troops patrolled the streets.

The police department had set up five “safe houses” around the city and unmarked police cruisers patrolled evacuated neighborhoods. Mayor Nagin had promised zero-tolerance for looting and threatened to send any looters directly to the “Big House”—Angola State Penitentiary.

Newark, California-based Risk Management Solutions, Inc. estimated land-based damages from Gustav at \$3 billion to \$7 billion. Other estimates placed land damages at \$6 billion to \$10 billion, with losses mainly in Louisiana. These figures may underestimate damages by not including injury to uninsured property or destruction excluded from coverage, including one of the biggest potential types of damage—flooding.

Following Katrina—which saw insurance claims in the area of \$41 billion in connection with 1.7 million claims for damages to homes, businesses and vehicles in six states—insurance companies sought to limit their

liability for future storms. Allstate and State Farm, the two largest US home insurers, have raised their policy rates and cut back on coverage offered in areas most vulnerable to tropical storms.

AIR Worldwide estimates that losses for offshore drilling exposures in the Gulf of Mexico could top \$10 billion. These damages may be the result of winds and waves on platforms as well as direct and indirect losses of revenue due to reductions in oil and gas production. Oil companies and rig owners, which shut down virtually all oil and natural gas production in the Gulf as Gustav approached, were beginning to put equipment and people back in place as the storm moved on Tuesday.

An \$8 drop in the price of a barrel of oil suggested that the storm had not resulted in significant losses for the oil companies. President Bush, however, seized on the event to push for legislation to approve more domestic oil production. He called on Congress to lift the 27-year old legislative ban on offshore drilling in the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) and Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR).

While no levees appeared to have been breached in the course of the storm, it is highly likely that a far more tragic outcome would have ensued if predictions of Gustav as the "mother of all hurricanes" had been borne out. Since Katrina struck—claiming just under 2,000 lives and causing an estimated \$90 billion in damages—the \$15 billion levee reconstruction project has not been completed and is not slated to be finished until 2011.

Interviewed on the Jim Lehrer program on PBS, Major General Don Riley, deputy commander of the US Army Corps of Engineers, explained: "To withstand a Katrina-level storm would take an enormous effort. The system we are now building to withstand the 1 percent-chance storm—Katrina was about a 400-year storm. This design we're constructing is about a 100-year storm."

Commenting on the response to Hurricane Gustav, Michael Greenberger, director of the Center for Health and Homeland Security at the University of Maryland, noted, "I don't think we can be patting ourselves on the back and doing a victory dance."

"We've got a lot to go through here. We've got Hurricane Hanna bearing down on the Southeast," Greenberger added, referring to Tropical Storm Hanna,

which is brewing in the Caribbean and on a course for the Carolinas on the US Southeast coast.

He pointed to the general decay of the US infrastructure, saying, "If you talk to any governor, they will tell you there are levees in their state that they're very worried about, their bridges, tunnels, dams."

New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region appear to have sidestepped an outcome of equal or greater proportion to the Katrina tragedy three years ago. The threat of such a catastrophe, however, remains very real.

Television footage on Monday showed waves crashing over the Industrial Canal in New Orleans, sparking reminders of the devastating floods that put as much as 80 percent of the city under water in 2005. Three years on, large areas of the city have not recovered, especially working-class and poor areas. In the Lower 9th Ward, devastated by Katrina, less than a fifth of pre-storm residences have been reclaimed.

For wide layers of the New Orleans population, the tragedy and suffering in the wake of Hurricane Katrina—compounded by the neglect, indifference and criminality on the part of government authorities—persists in the form of decaying social services and public infrastructure.



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