

Texas hit hard by Hurricane Ike

Naomi Spencer
15 September 2008

Hurricane Ike made landfall on the heavily populated southeast coast of Texas early Saturday morning, causing flooding and widespread damage to cities along the Gulf. The storm struck the US as a 600-mile-wide Category 2, less powerful than meteorological estimates had warned but still tremendously destructive, hitting areas still damaged from last month's Hurricane Gustav and 2005's Rita.

As of midday Sunday, at least eight deaths were linked to Ike, including two in Louisiana, although rescue crews had yet to survey all of the affected area. Were it not for the mass evacuation of more than 2.3 million along the Texas and Louisiana coasts, the death toll would undoubtedly been much higher.

At least 100,000 homes were reported to be flooded. Many more sustained wind damage from 100-mile-per-hour gusts. Strong winds brought down trees and power lines across a huge area. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, most of the coastal region, home to 5 million people, was without power Saturday. Utility company spokespersons told the press that it could be weeks before power was restored.

One of the hardest hit areas was Galveston, Texas, where the storm surge was recorded at 12 to 15 feet. This level was lower than had been projected for the region, but was still enough to top parts of the century-old sea wall. Much of the city sits only a few feet above sea level on Galveston Island.

Some 20,000 residents of Galveston—a city of 57,000—had stayed behind after Texas governor Rick Perry issued an order to evacuate last week. Throughout the region, an estimated 100,000 to 140,000 residents had remained.

Galveston Mayor Lyda Ann Thomas described the state of the city in a statement Sunday: “Galveston has been hit hard. We have no power. We have no gas. We have no communications. We’re not sure when any of that will be up and running. We want our citizens to

stay where they are. Do not come back to Galveston. You cannot live here right now.” Community leaders throughout the region have said it may be a month or longer before residents are allowed re-entry to assess the damage.

The *Chronicle* reported that ten buildings had burned to the ground, and another seven, including two apartment buildings, had collapsed in the high winds. The paper reported “huge portions of the island remained under water and by Saturday evening had not been reached by emergency personnel.

Galveston Fire Department chief Mike Varela told the *New York Times* that water stood 8 to 10 feet deep in some parts of the city. “The low-lying neighborhoods are extremely flooded right now,” he said. As of Sunday, state search-and-rescue crews had saved at least 2,000 people stranded in homes and vehicles, mostly in Galveston.

Houston, the fourth-largest city in the United States with 2.2 million people, was also hit. As it moved inland, Ike's wind speeds lower to the ground decreased, sparing many smaller buildings. In downtown Houston, windows in the tallest skyscrapers were shattered. Glass and steel debris from the buildings were flung into the streets.

Houston officials have described the situation as “calm” but have imposed a 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew for the next week. The city is without power. Local media report that water supplies are also short. Officials on Sunday issued a directive to conserve and boil water.

As with the thousands of New Orleans residents who were not evacuated before Hurricane Katrina made landfall three years ago, many Texas residents who remained in their homes were the extremely poor, elderly or disabled.

In the days leading up to Ike's landfall, many media reports and statements by Texas officials described those staying behind as “stubborn” or “ignoring

warnings,” implying that potential victims deserved the fate they might meet in the storm. However, one reason repeatedly cited by those who stayed was the debacle of the 2005 evacuation of the region before Hurricane Rita.

Galveston resident John Dundee told the *New York Times* Saturday that his family decided to stay to avoid repeating the misery they experienced in 2005. “My wife and I sat up in traffic for 27 hours, just trying to make it to my children’s house in Waco [230 miles away]...we felt we might be safer here than out on the highway,” he told the paper.

As Rita approached, state officials ordered mandatory evacuation of the entire area of southeast Texas, sparking the largest mass emergency movement of people in American history. In the city of Houston, Mayor Bill White made a point of telling residents that no public shelters would be open to them. As a result, more than 3 million people crowded into airports and freeways, creating a gridlock in 98 degree heat. On Interstate 45 north of Houston, the vehicle backup stretched for a hundred miles. Many vehicles ran out of gas or overheated, compounding the jam.

In all, more than 120 deaths were attributed to Rita, with only 7 directly the result of the storm. Nearly 30 people were killed in accidents related to Rita before the hurricane even hit, including 24 elderly people who were burned to death in a bus on the traffic-jammed Interstate north of Houston.

Like Hurricane Rita, the landfall of Ike in the oil-refining center of the US has had an impact on the working class throughout the entire country in the form of spiking gasoline prices. Overnight, regular gasoline rose an average 6 cents per gallon nationwide, to \$3.79 on Sunday. Since Thursday, gas has risen 13 cents per gallon. Gouging in some states shot prices up to more than \$5 per gallon.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact