

Hurricane Isaac takes aim at US Gulf Coast

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Hurricane Isaac was expected to make landfall early this morning as a Category 1 storm, threatening major flooding. States of emergency were declared in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi, as the region braced for the storm to hit exactly seven years after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the region on August 29, 2005.

The storm left at least 24 dead in the Dominican Republic and Haiti as it moved through the Caribbean and caused soaking rains in Florida, where 80,000 were without power as of Monday evening. The Republican Party delayed the start of its national convention as pounding rains hit Tampa, but caused minimal damage in the surrounding area.

Politicians, Democratic and Republican alike, are fearful of anything approaching a repeat of Katrina. More than 1,800 people were killed—with many more never accounted for—as a result of the storm and the criminal lack of response by authorities at both the federal and local level. Over 1 million people were displaced. The indifference of the Bush administration and the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) to the suffering provoked widespread revulsion, both in the US and internationally.

Five years after Katrina, Gulf Coast residents and small businesses are still reeling from another disaster—the April 20, 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, which crippled fishing and tourism and caused widespread ecological damage. Official unemployment in the Gulf region still stands above 8 percent, and nearly one in four residents relies on government assistance.

In the aftermath of Katrina, a \$14.5 billion hurricane protection system has been constructed, ringing the greater New Orleans, Louisiana area with 350 miles of levees, floodwalls and floodgates. However, the system has yet to be tested, and several sections remain

uncompleted. As the storm took dead aim at New Orleans on Tuesday, engineers closed 127 floodgates around the city, hoping to keep water from the Gulf from surging into the area.

While attention focused on New Orleans, the storm's winds were expected to be felt more than 200 miles from the storm's center. The effects of water were expected to be worse than wind, as the slow-moving storm picked up moisture from the Gulf. Isaac was predicted to bring 7 to 14 inches of rain to southeast Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, with some regions expecting up to 20 inches of rain. The storm could push walls of water, dumping rain and flooding the low-lying coastal areas of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and the Florida Panhandle.

In low-lying areas and areas outside the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority East system, levees were expected to be breached. In Cocodrie, Louisiana, two major floodgates intended to protect this coastal community are still under construction, and one of them will not be completed until next hurricane season. Residents in the area are under a mandatory evacuation order.

Gulf residents are also fearful that oil left from the massive BP oil spill of 2010 could blow up on to the beaches as a result of Isaac. Scientists believe that large tar mats remain submerged just off the coast. The federal government reported that more than three-quarters of oil production has been halted in the Gulf in preparation for the storm, as companies evacuated offshore oil and gas production platforms and drilling rigs.

In New Orleans, where the memory of Katrina is still very vivid, no evacuation order has been issued. Democrat Mitch Landrieu, the city's mayor since 2010, stated Tuesday, "We have a plan in place to secure the city, and we have a plan to respond quickly in the event of emergencies," adding, "We're confident that the

work we've done in the last few years makes us fully capable of handling this type of storm."

In the Lower Ninth Ward and St. Bernard Parish, areas flooded by storm waters in 2005, some residents made the decision to leave, suspicious of authorities' assurances that the new levee system would be able to handle the storm. Katrina has left a permanent imprint on these and other poorer sections of New Orleans, where thousands of homes remain vacant and derelict, victim of a conscious policy of forcing working class residents out in favor building up the city's wealthier areas.

While some Gulf Coast residents have chosen to flee in advance of Isaac, others decided to ride out the storm, many because they are unable to afford the cost of evacuation. With no government assistance provided, the average Gulf Coast family fleeing the storm could expect to pay in the area of \$250 to \$300 a day for food, lodging and gas in addition to lost wages.

Speaking to reporters well ahead of the storm on Sunday, Mayor Landrieu said that the Superdome, the New Orleans airport and the Convention Center would not be opened as public shelters. These locations were the scenes of horrific conditions during Katrina, as a result of the woefully inadequate preparations of federal, state and local authorities. It now appears that in an effort to avoid another such scenario, residents are to be left to fend for themselves.

Despite predictions that Isaac would not be as severe a storm as Katrina, politicians at the national level made some effort to avoid appearing indifferent to the threat of another catastrophe. Under the direction of the Obama administration, FEMA officials have been on the ground in the Gulf region for over a week.

The president declared a state of emergency in Louisiana late Monday, making federal support available for public health and safety and to protect property. Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, a Republican, called on the federal government to go further and pay for all emergency protective measures. While Obama called on residents to heed the directions of local officials in advance of Isaac, the hurricane threat did not stop him from embarking on a two-day college tour to woo young voters.

Governor Jindal, along with fellow Republican governors Robert Bentley of Alabama and Phil Bryant of Mississippi, cancelled their trips to the Republican

National Convention in Tampa in advance of Isaac's impact. As for Mitt Romney, he commented to the press Monday in New Hampshire, "Our thoughts are with the people that are in the storm's path and hope that they're spared any major destruction," but said he was anticipating a "great convention ahead."

As the Republican convention gets underway in Tampa, and the Democrats prepare for theirs in Charlotte, North Carolina next week, what most concerns politicians of both big business parties is that the potential destruction of Hurricane Isaac could overshadow these proceedings. They worry that the respective conventions and their celebration of corporate wealth—juxtaposed to the suffering of Gulf Coast residents in the wake of the storm—could revive memories of the Katrina tragedy and the government's appalling response to it.



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