

Massive hurricane hits Northeastern US

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A deadly hurricane hit the densely populated northeastern United States on October 29, affecting tens of millions of people and posing a grave threat to the region's transit and power infrastructure.

The storm, Hurricane Sandy, made landfall in southern New Jersey, only about 100 miles from the New York metropolitan area, on Monday evening. Wind gusts of up to 75 miles per hour were accompanied by steady rain and storm surges of 6 to 11 feet that led to widespread flooding.

As of Monday evening, there were reports of thousands of people stranded in flooded homes, and reports of fatalities, including some caused by fallen trees, had also begun to come in. Whole communities were cut off by the storm on the coast of Connecticut, and the Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy told a news conference of a "Katrina-like" situation.

The entire area from Virginia to Massachusetts was battered by hurricane or gale force winds. Governors in nine states declared states of emergency, and 2 million homes lost electricity in the tri-state region of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut alone. In Connecticut 37 percent of utility customers, some 460,000, reported no power as of Monday evening. In New York state the number without power had reached 1 million and in New Jersey it was 500,000.

Unheard of scenes of massive flooding in lower Manhattan were reported, with 2-3 feet of water damaging countless street level businesses in the area. Battery Park, the well-known tourist destination from which ferries to Staten Island and the Statue of Liberty depart, was totally flooded. Electric power in this area was almost completely gone, with many skyscrapers in the business district totally dark. Some subway stations were flooded, but the extent of the damage to the transit system was not clear and would not be clear for some time as the storm surge and flooding continued.

The destructive power of the storm in the New York

area was primarily the product of wind and storm surges, with relatively little rain, at least up to Monday night. Wind gusts of 50 miles per hour were forecast until at least 12 noon on Tuesday.

On Sunday afternoon, New York Mayor Bloomberg had ordered the evacuation of 370,000 people living in the low-lying areas of the city's five boroughs, including the Rockaways in Queens, Coney Island and Red Hook in Brooklyn, Battery Park City in Manhattan and City Island in the Bronx.

Bloomberg, insisting that 45,000 residents of buildings managed by the city's Housing Authority leave, ordered the shutdown of power to building elevators, along with heat and hot water. Some residents pointed out that residents of luxury apartment buildings in low-lying areas, such as Battery Park City, were not pressured similarly to leave their homes.

The city's subways were shut down at 7 p.m. on Sunday, and transit officials predicted they might not reopen until Wednesday at the earliest, and then only in part. The public schools were shut for at least Monday and Tuesday, along with government offices and most of the city's business and commerce. The New York Stock Exchange was also closed for Monday and Tuesday, the first time it had been shut for two consecutive days for weather-related reasons since the 19th century.

The storm, developing toward the end of the August-October season in which the great majority of hurricanes and tropical storms hit the eastern US, packed an especially life-threatening punch because of its unusually wide path and also its westward track.

Most hurricanes weaken and turn out to the Atlantic as they approach the northeast, but this one was being drawn to the west by a huge trough of high pressure. As a result of this, it was expected to turn into a winter storm, dumping up to two feet of snow in parts of Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia and Ohio before

weakening in the Ohio Valley.

What made the storm especially destructive was its enormous size, at least 1,000 miles in diameter. The prolonged high winds and storm surges, coupled with the full moon on Monday night that increased high tides, all contributed to the massive, almost unprecedented flooding over such a wide area.

The wind, high tides and storm surges were expected to pose a grave threat of flooding to the New York City subway system. As of Sunday night, a maximum water level of 11.7 feet was forecast for the Battery in lower Manhattan, breaking the record of 10.5 feet that was set by Hurricane Donna in 1960. One meteorologist on the Weather Underground web site warned of “a 50 percent chance that Sandy’s storm surge will end up flooding a portion of the New York City subway system.” The lower Manhattan areas of the system would be flooded at levels of 10.5 feet “unless efforts to sandbag the entrances are successful.”

The destructive potential of the storm surge was put at a record high of 5.8 on a scale of 0 to 6, according to Weather Underground. This is a higher potential than any recent hurricane, including Hurricane Katrina. As of Monday night the extent of the flooding of the New York subways that would be taking place over the next six to 12 hours was not yet clear.

If the subway’s electrical system becomes saturated with salt water, parts of the system could be out of operation for a month or more, at an economic cost of some \$55 billion. In addition, underground electrical infrastructure used by Con Edison and other utilities could also be badly damaged by salt water.

According to Klaus Jacob, a climate scientist at Columbia University’s Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, Tropical Storm Irene, only 14 months ago, came, on average, just one foot short of paralyzing transportation into and out of Manhattan. If the surge had been just that much higher, Dr. Jacob told the *New York Times* last month, subway tunnels would have flooded, segments of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive and roads along the Hudson River [the two north-south highways serving Manhattan] would have turned into rivers, and sections of the commuter rail system would have been impassable or without of power.

Climate scientists have warned with increasing urgency of the dangers posed by extreme weather, particularly under conditions in which the infrastructure

has been allowed to decay. The surge of the current storm was at least a foot higher than that of Irene. In the period following that major storm, however, nothing has been done about the threats to New York’s transit and electrical distribution systems.



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