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The Katrina Disaster

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Section: Special Features

Catastrophe struck the U.S. Gulf Coast Aug. 29, when **Hurricane** Katrina carved a path of devastation across low-lying regions of S Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. The storm, which hit S Florida 4 days earlier as a Category 1 **hurricane**, strengthened to Category 5 while crossing the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. By the time Katrina made landfall near Buras, SE Louisiana, it had weakened to Category 4. But the enormous storm still packed high storm surges and sustained winds of over 140 mph. (See also Chronology of the Year's Events, Disasters, Environment.)

Katrina was a Category 3 **hurricane** when its eye passed just E of New Orleans. Experts had long warned of the flood dangers faced by the nation's 35th-largest city, much of which lies below sea level. The storm caused breaches in the city's flood-protection levees, leaving about 80% of New Orleans under water and knocking out electric, water, sew-age, transportation, and communications systems. Katrina also flattened much of Gulfport and Biloxi, MS; flooded Mobile, AL; and leveled or inundated smaller cities and towns across a 90,000-sq-mi area.

Up to 100,000 people were stranded in flooded New Orleans for days in squalid and dangerous conditions awaiting relief and evacuation.

Katrina was the deadliest **hurricane** to hit the U.S. in more than 75 years. By early October, the confirmed death toll exceeded 1,200, with more than 80% of the fatalities in Louisiana, predominantly in the New Orleans area. It was expected to rank among the costliest natural disasters in U.S. history. Nearly ¾ of all houses in New Orleans were damaged or destroyed; from 25,000 to 50,000 homes were regarded as unsalvageable. In Mississippi, 2/3 of homes in the 6 southernmost counties were severely damaged or destroyed.

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By Sept. 8, Pres. Bush had requested and Congress had approved more than \$62 bil in emergency spending for **hurricane** relief. The Congressional

Budget Office Oct. 7 estimated total minimum federal spending at \$150 billion for cleanup, aid, and other projects. The cost to private insurers was expected to exceed \$40 bil.

Katrina dealt a stiff blow to the U.S. petrochemical industry, which is concentrated in the Gulf region; to the New Orleans maritime industry, which handles about 15% of U.S. cargo tonnage; to Gulf Coast travel and tourism; and to Louisiana commercial fisheries and the state's sugarcane, rice, and cotton crops.

Poor coordination between local, state, and federal officials raised important questions about U.S. disaster preparedness. New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco, and Pres. George W. Bush all drew criticism for their response to Katrina. Many critics faulted the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for its sluggish handling of Katrina rescue and relief efforts and for its reliance on no-bid or limited-bid contracts in the immediate aftermath of the disaster.

Americans reacted generously, by early Oct., donations to relief efforts totaled \$1.7 bil, with 65% of the funds going to the American Red Cross. A Katrina relief fund headed by former Pres. George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton soon raised more than \$100 mil. According to the U.S. State Dept., more than 130 countries and a dozen international organizations offered help.

### **Hurricane Timeline**

**Tues., Aug 23:** First advisory from NOAA for "Tropical Depression 12." at 5 PM; by 11 AM. Aug. 24, **hurricane** watch and tropical storm warning are issued for Florida.

**Thurs., Aug. 25:** Katrina reaches **hurricane** wind speeds, and hits SE Florida.

**Sun., Aug. 28:** Katrina strengthens in Gulf of Mexico. New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin issues mandatory evacuation order.

**Mon., Aug. 29:** Katrina slams into SE Louisiana. Widespread destruction across Gulf Coast region. New Orleans levees fail.

**Tues., Aug. 30:** 80% of New Orleans under water. Rescuers save hundreds from rooftops. Thousands seek shelter in Superdome and Convention Center; conditions rapidly deteriorate.

**Wed., Aug 31:** Evacuation of Superdome begins.

**Thurs., Sept. 1:** Reports of lawlessness in New Orleans lead to suspension of Superdome evacuation.

**Fri., Sept. 2:** Pres. Bush calls results of federal relief efforts "not acceptable." but in his first visit to the disaster zone praises FEMA Director Michael Brown. Congress passes emergency \$10.5 bil spending measure. Led by Army Lt. Gen. Russel Honoré, large numbers of National Guard troops begin arriving in New Orleans.

**Sun., Sept. 4:** Evacuation of Superdome and Convention Center is complete. When Katrina evacuees in Texas exceed 230,000. TX Gov. Rick

Perry orders some airlifted to other states.

**Thurs., Sept 8:** Congress approves and Pres. Bush signs additional \$51.8 bil in Katrina relief funds.

**Fri., Sept. 9:** Coast Guard Vice Adm. Thad Allen replaces Brown as FEMA's **hurricane** relief coordinator.

**Mon., Sept. 12:** Brown resigns as FEMA director.

**Thurs., Sept. 15:** In TV speech broadcast from Jackson Square in New Orleans, Bush pledges massive Gulf Coast reconstruction effort.

**Mon., Sept. 26:** All residents of New Orleans' Algiers neighborhood, pop. 57,000, are allowed to return.

**Mon., Oct. 3:** Nearly all public schools in neighboring Jefferson Parish reopen, but New Orleans city schools remain closed.

**Tues., Oct. 11:** U.S. Army Corps of Engineers finishes pumping floodwaters from the New Orleans metropolitan area.

### **Hurricane Facts**

(All figures are latest available as of Oct. 15, unless otherwise indicated.)

- **Confirmed death toll from Katrina:** 1,277, including 1,035 in Louisiana, 224 in Mississippi, 14 in Florida, 2 in Alabama, and 2 in Georgia.
- **New Orleans city population before Katrina:** 462,000 (2004 est.). As of 2000, the African-American population of New Orleans totaled 325,947.
- **Number of survivors rescued or assisted by the U.S. Coast Guard:** 33,544 from Katrina.
- **People who stayed behind in New Orleans:** about 50,000-100,000. About 2/3 of those who stayed were African Americans. About 30% of African-American households and 15% of white households did not have cars.
- **Where the Katrina evacuees went:** FEMA records analyzed by USA Today show that evacuee families settled in all 50 states. About ¾ of evacuee households filed claims for aid from places within 250 mi of New Orleans; another 18% or more migrated to Houston and other communities within 500 mi.
- **Funds distributed by FEMA to hurricane survivors:** more than \$3.1 bil to an estimated 1 mil households.
- **People remaining in shelters:** about 68,200, down from a high of 300,000.
- **Red Cross funds committed to hurricane relief:** \$1.33 bil, of which \$906 mil was emergency financial aid to some 963,000 families. The organization provided 3.2 mil overnight stays for **hurricane** survivors in 1,150 shelters in 27 states and Washington, DC. More than 483,000 people accounted for over 49 mil overnight stays at hotels and motels throughout the U.S., under a federal program funded by FEMA and operated by the Red Cross. In alliance with the Southern Baptist Convention, the Red Cross served survivors

more than 20 mil hot meals.

- **New Orleans city population after Katrina:** estimated at 250,000 during the daytime, 60,000-70,000 at night.
- **Funds raised by the Salvation Army for hurricane relief:** more than \$224 mil. The Salvation Army provided food, water, shelter, ice, and other essentials to more than 600,000 people.
- **Reduction in U.S. energy production caused by Katrina and Rita:** cumulative drop in output, Aug. 26-Oct. 13, 56.6 million barrels of oil (10.3% of annual U.S. production from the Gulf of Mexico) and 283 billion cu ft of gas (7.8% of yearly U.S. output from the Gulf of Mexico). The Gulf Coast region normally accounts for 47% of total U.S. oil refinery capacity.
- **Oil spills caused by Katrina:** 40 or more, releasing more than 193,000 barrels of oil and petrochemicals.
- **Losses to the Gulf Coast travel industry:** about \$50 mil per day. According to the Travel Industry Association of America, travel spending annually accounts for \$13.5 bil and 191,000 jobs in Louisiana, \$2.8 bil and 38,000 jobs in Mississippi, and \$2 bil and 30,000 jobs in Alabama.
- **Casino gambling:** The storm shut down 13 Gulf Coast and Mississippi River casinos in Biloxi, Gulfport, and Bay St. Louis, costing the state about \$500,000 per day in taxes.
- **New Orleans maritime industry:** Ports in the New Orleans region normally service more than 6,000 ships a year. The Port of New Orleans is a leading U.S. entry point for imported steel, natural rubber, and coffee. Up to 80% of port operations remained closed more than a month after the storm.
- **Value of contracts awarded by FEMA with little or no bidding:** at least \$1.5 bil. Acting FEMA Director R. David Paulison pledged at a Senate hearing Oct. 6 to review such contracts. These included a \$236 mil deal with Carnival Cruise Lines for emergency housing on 3 ships with 7,116 beds. At full capacity the cost for housing and feeding each person would be \$1,275 per week — more than twice the price of a ticket for a Carnival Caribbean cruise booked online.
- **Pets rescued from the Katrina disaster zone:** more than 8,000. In addition to cats and dogs, rescuers recovered exotic birds, snakes, goats, pot-bellied pigs, and other pets. As of Oct. 11, more than 10,000 animals from areas impacted by Katrina were listed in the online database maintained by Petfinder.com.

### [Living on the Edge: A Brief History of New Orleans](#)

New Orleans has long had enormous military and commercial importance. The original town, known today as the French Quarter, or Vieux Carré ("Old Square"), was founded by French settlers in 1718 on a crescent-shaped strip of high ground at a bend in the river. Ruled by France and Spain before it became part of the U.S. through the Louisiana Purchase (1803), the city was both a center of the slave trade and a haven for free people of color. European, African, Caribbean, and Native American influences blended to produce a culture that was both Catholic and Creole. Unique among American cities. New Orleans is the home of the largest Mardi Gras celebration, and the birth-place of jazz. Blues, funk, and rock and roll have also contributed to the city's musical heritage.

Sometimes called the Big Easy. New Orleans has had a difficult history.

**Hurricanes** in 1721 and 1722 knocked down much of what the early settlers built, and most of the city burned to the ground in the Good Friday fire of 1788. The British tried unsuccessfully to capture New Orleans in the War of 1812; 50 years later, Union troops occupied the city during the Civil War. Until the late 1850s, the threat of yellow fever epidemics, which had killed thousands in 1818, 1847, and 1853, dictated the evacuation of up to 1/3 of the population in the summer months.

The Crescent City is surrounded by water, which has been both a blessing and a curse. Waterborne trade, especially in cotton, made New Orleans the 3rd-biggest city in the U.S. at the 1840 Census, with a population of more than 100,000. The city grew to become a major U.S. port, with millions of tons of grains and other commodities passing through on the Mississippi.

To contain the river within bounds, the early French settlers began work a levee — an earthen embankment. Today, under the stewardship of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the city is guarded by a complex system of levees, dikes, seawalls, canals, and pumps. This system was intended to channel the waters of the Mississippi and protect the region against powerful storm surges. But deprived of silt deposits from the natural river flow, the land has been eroding. Experts had warned that the combination of rising seas, sinking land, and natural wetland barriers vanishing at a rate of up to 25 sq mi per year was making New Orleans ever more vulnerable to a potent **hurricane**. Katrina confirmed their worst fears.

### Other Major U.S. Natural Disasters

- **1889** Johnstown (PA) flood: the poorly maintained South Fork dam fails May 31, inundating the town with 20 mil tons of water; at least 2,200 dead, up to 30,000 homeless.
- **1900** Galveston (TX) **hurricane**: a Category 4 storm Sept. 8 lashes the island with 15 ft high waves and winds over 130 mph; at least 8,000 dead.
- **1906** San Francisco earthquake: about three-fourths of the city is devastated by a quake of at least 7.7 magnitude, Apr. 18, and ensuing fires; more than 3,000 dead, 225,000 homeless, 28,000 buildings destroyed.
- **1927** Great Mississippi flood: rising waters in April overwhelm levees from Cairo (IL) to Greenville (MS), inundating 165 mil acres and hundreds of towns; at least 246 dead, more than 700,000 homeless.
- **1992 Hurricane** Andrew: the Category 4 storm makes landfall Aug. 24 and leaves a trail of destruction across S Florida 25 mi wide and 60 mi long; in S Florida alone, at least 40 dead, 250,000 homeless, \$25 bil in property damage.

MAP: **HURRICANE** KATRINA

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By Geoffrey M. Horn

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