

Hurricane Irma will batter Florida and 'devastate the United States,' officials warn

Hurricane Irma swept across the Bahamas and Cuba on Friday as the deadly storm hurtled toward Florida's doorstep and threatened to ravage the state with destruction not seen in a generation.

As the weather forecasts and warnings from officials grew increasingly dire, hundreds of thousands of people across Florida fled their homes in an effort to get out before the rapidly-closing window to escape Irma's wrath slammed shut. Forecasters said Irma, a storm of remarkable size and power that has already battered islands across the Caribbean, would approach South Florida by Sunday morning and could slam ashore there before tracking up the state's spine.

"It's not a question of if Florida's going to be impacted, it's a question of how bad Florida's going to be impacted," William "Brock" Long, administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, said at a news briefing on Friday.

Even as emergencies were declared in Georgia and the Carolinas - where heavy rains and flooding are expected early next week - attention remained focused on Florida as the state anxiously prepared for Irma's arrival, with forecasts calling for up to 20 inches of rain in some areas and thrashing winds no matter how the storm pivots before hitting the mainland United States.

"Irma is likely to make landfall in Florida as a dangerous major hurricane, and will bring life-threatening wind impacts to much of the state regardless of the exact track of the center," the National Hurricane Center said Friday.

The center said that Irma, which had maximum sustained winds near 155 mph and higher gusts on Friday and passed between the Central Bahamas and north coast of Cuba, was expected "to remain a powerful Category 4 hurricane as it approaches Florida."

Local, state and federal officials have offered ominous warning after warning as the storm zeroed in on Florida, making clear how much danger they felt the

Sunshine State could face in the coming days. Long urged people from Alabama to North Carolina to monitor and prepare for Irma, calling the storm “a threat that is going to devastate the United States, either Florida or some of the southeastern states.”

Floridians are familiar with ominous forecasts and hurricane warnings, and many in the state have painful memories of Hurricane Andrew, which made landfall as a Category 5 monster in 1992, and other storms that brought lashing rain and winds. But when asked about people in South Florida who intend to ride out the storm at home, Long was blunt.

“I can guarantee you that I don’t know anybody in Florida that’s ever experienced what’s about to hit South Florida,” Long said. “They need to get out and listen and heed the warnings.”

Mark DeMaria, acting deputy director of the hurricane center, said Friday afternoon that the latest models showed the storm track shifting slightly to the west, putting southwest Florida in particular jeopardy for the most violent winds even as all of South Florida will have significant impacts.

“We really want to emphasize the very vulnerable Southwest Florida area,” DeMaria said.

Scott, the governor, has warned people that evacuation zones could expand and said that all Floridians “should be prepared” to leave their homes. Scott has also cited the memories of Andrew, calling Irma “more devastating on its current path,” and warned that much of the state could be imperiled.

“Based on what we now know, the majority of Florida will have major hurricane impacts with deadly storm surge and life-threatening winds,” Scott said. “And we can expect this along the entire east coast and the entire west coast.”

In addition to packing intense power, Irma was also an immense storm, forecasters say, with hurricane-force winds extending some 70 miles from the center - and tropical-storm force winds extending as far as 185 miles out.

Airports around the state said they would suspend flights and cease operations. Publix, the grocery store chain, announced plans to close stores across the state in waves and did not say when they would reopen. Tom Bossert, homeland

security adviser to President Donald Trump, on Friday said that people need to have enough food and water to get by during a period when the rain and wind will prevent authorities from getting to them.

“We have pre-deployed and pre-staged, but we can’t actually get to that final point of care until conditions permit,” he said during a White House briefing Friday.

The hurricane center has issued a hurricane warning covering all of South Florida, where local officials have ordered evacuations along the coast. In Miami-Dade County, the state’s most populous, mandatory evacuations were issued for about 660,000 people, including for Miami Beach and Key Biscayne. It was the largest evacuation ordered in Miami-Dade history, said Carlos Gimenez, the county’s mayor.

Miami City Hall, an Art Deco style building right on Biscayne Bay in Coconut Grove, an evacuation zone, was locked and mostly vacant on Friday. The only City Hall parking spot that was occupied? A black Ford Expedition in the spot labeled for Mayor Tomas Regalado.

Many people ordered to leave Broward and Palm Beach counties were directed to public schools, which have been shuttered across the state by Gov. Rick Scott, R, so they can serve as shelters and staging areas for first responders. Many public schools across the state had already canceled classes, while colleges had also shuttered campuses and rescheduled football games.

Pompano Beach High School, which sits just a few miles from the Atlantic Ocean and is normally home of the Golden Tornadoes, was transformed Friday into a safe haven for about 150 people seeking shelter from Irma. Several volunteers said they expected the school, one of about 20 facilities Broward County is using as a shelter, to reach its capacity of 280 people by Saturday.

Those already packed into the school’s cafeteria had one thing in common: They were either unable or unwilling to leave the area, despite a mandatory evacuation order for several sections of the county, including anyone close to the nearby ocean. Only those who had registered starting at noon on Thursday were allowed into the school, and once capacity was reached, others who showed up were directed to venues with larger spaces.

Three Broward County Sheriffs deputies were at the front door on Friday, inspecting all bags for weapons, drugs and alcohol. Two paramedics were assigned to the shelter in three shifts, and two will be in the building 24 hours a day starting Saturday morning, along with at least a half dozen law enforcement officers. The men, women and children filing inside have been greeted by several volunteers and county employees who will be working around the clock starting Saturday at 8 a.m.

They're staffing a facility that doesn't quite have all the comforts of home - there are two bathrooms and no showers, cots or Wi-Fi - but there are a few. Two television sets were tuned to the Weather Channel, providing the latest news about Irma's approach - all of it bad. There were also nine microwave ovens, plugs for cellphone and computers and, eventually, a generator that will be put into use once the power fails, as is expected once the hurricane hits.

Still, according to one volunteer, the school was built to withstand a Category 5 hurricane. Many occupants came fully-prepared, with a number of air mattresses, chaise lounges and sleeping bags set up in neat rows throughout the cafeteria. Three free meals a day will be served during the duration, and water, coffee and snacks are also available.

Someone brought in stacks of books, and others played checkers, cards, watched TV, read or took naps. An elderly couple came in concerned about keeping their insulin refrigerated. They were quickly assured by a paramedic they would be stored in a cafeteria fridge and available any time.

Suzie and Renè Wilhelm are here on vacation from the Netherlands. They were staying at a hotel a block from the nearby Fort Lauderdale beach, located in one of the evacuation zones.

Renè, a Mercedes Benz salesman back home, said they left Amsterdam for Orlando last Monday, not really aware of the monster storm gathering hundreds of miles away.

"We've been coming to Florida since 2000- Orlando, Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and we had no idea this was happening," Renè said, sitting on one of two chaise lounges he had purchased Friday morning at a nearby Target. "We're used to snow, but not this."

They stayed in Orlando for a day, then drove south on Wednesday hoping the storm still might veer away from South Florida.

“We knew it was coming,” said Suzie, who works in health care. “But we also heard it was coming to Orlando, so we didn’t know what to do. As we were driving here, I thought, ‘This is a stupid thing to do.’ I called our travel agent in the Netherlands, and also the same company here, to see if they could get us out, but they never even called me back or answered my emails. The woman at our hotel tried to book us somewhere else, but everything was filled.”

They tried one shelter, but were told there was no food and that they could not leave if they went in.

“It was terrifying, so we came here,” she said. “You can come and go. People have been very nice to us.”

Not far away, Bill and Jane Borum, both native Washingtonians and retirees, were also trying to get comfortable on newly-purchased lounges and reading to pass the hours. They live in a condo at the Bay Colony high-rise in Fort Lauderdale, just steps from the ocean, and left when the evacuation order was issued. They thought about driving north to get out of harm’s way, but “we really didn’t have any place to go,” said Jane, who attended Alice Deal Junior High and Wilson High School in Northwest Washington “many years ago” and retired to South Florida with her husband a few years ago.

“We saw that all of Florida was going to be covered (by the storm), so that didn’t make sense,” she said. “My girlfriend was going to stay with relatives in Tifton, Georgia. She left here at 7:30 Thursday morning and didn’t get there until 11:30 at night. The traffic was a mess. We didn’t want to do that.

“Our kids in Maryland wanted us to fly home, but we couldn’t get on a flight, so now we’re here,” she added. “It’s our first time in a shelter, and the last, I hope.”

Some hit the road but did not want to go too far. Joseph “Tony” Vincent, 82, braked his 3-wheeled bicycle to a stop in the Naples Mobile Home Park. He has seen many storms and planned to hit the road for Irma, but he was not heading far away – he has weekend room reservations at a modest motel just outside the park, along Tamiami Trail.

“I seen Hurricane Donna blow the river completely out of its banks in Fort Myers,” he declared Friday morning. “A 2-story frame house swayed in the wind. This one is even bigger. I’m not dumb. My mama didn’t raise no fool.”

Vincent said that even if he had the money, he wouldn’t leave his home state over a hurricane.

“Hell, you’d be safer here than taking a car on those roads. You might be killed before you get to Atlanta,” he scoffed.

Other Florida fixtures hunkered down. The Miami-Dade Zoological Park and Gardens - otherwise known as Zoo Miami, which sprawls across more than 700 acres and has more than 3,000 animals - closed down on Thursday but said it would not be moving its animals.

“We don’t evacuate our animals since hurricanes can change direction at the last minute and you run the risk of evacuating to a more dangerous location,” the zoo said in a statement. “Furthermore, the stress of moving the animals can be more dangerous than riding out the storm. The animals that are considered dangerous will stay in their secure night houses, which are made of poured concrete and welded metal.”

When Hurricane Andrew struck, the zoo was hit hard. Tropical birds were missing, cages torn apart and animals traumatized - through, miraculously, most of the animals were unharmed.

Across the main arteries out of Florida, some trips took more than twice as long as normal. At one point late Thursday night and into Friday, so many cars clogged the Florida Turnpike that it took four hours to go 20 miles. People who fled the state trekked into Georgia and South Carolina. Atlanta’s downtown was turned into a temporary home for many evacuees, some of whom spent all night making the trip from South Florida. In South Carolina, the attorney general’s office reported more than 200 complaints from residents about price-gouging related to gasoline.

Fleeing to safer ground was not an option for many in the Caribbean, where Irma had claimed at least 16 lives - a toll expected to increase - and had the prime minister of tiny Barbuda grasping for a word to describe the devastation. The island, said Gaston Browne, was now “rubble.” France’s minister for overseas

territories, Annick Girardin, described “scenes of pillaging” on St. Martin as people cleaned out stores and roamed the streets in search of food and water.

On Haiti’s northern coast, the mayor of the city Fort Liberty, Louis Jacques Etienne, called it a “nuclear hurricane.”

“Crops are destroyed, cattle is dead, and my cities are broken. It is bad. Very very bad,” he said.

Even as this region struggled to grasp the toll of what had happened, another powerful hurricane was following in Irma’s wake. Hurricane Jose loomed as another threat, with the National Hurricane Center saying late Friday that it was “now an extremely dangerous Category 4 hurricane” expected to bring life-threatening flooding to the Leeward Islands, Virgin Islands and other areas already left reeling by Irma.

Berman reported from Washington. Patricia Sullivan in Naples, Florida, Lori Rozsa in Palm Beach County; Dustin Waters in Charleston, South Carolina; Perry Stein and Joel Achenbach in Miami; Anthony Faiola in Port-au-Prince, Haiti; and Brian Murphy, Jenna Johnson, Jason Samenow and Angela Fritz in Washington contributed to this report.

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