

Gustav swells to dangerous Cat 3 storm off Cuba

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Gustav swells to dangerous Cat 3 storm off Cuba

By MAURA AXELROD, Associated Press Writer 41 minutes ago

Gustav swelled to a fearsome Category 3 hurricane with winds of 120 mph (195 kph) as it shrieked toward the heartland of Cuba's cigar industry Saturday on a track to hit the U.S. Gulf Coast, three years after Hurricane Katrina.

The storm already has killed 78 people in the Caribbean and the U.S. National Hurricane Center in Miami said it had become the second major hurricane of the Atlantic season, following Bertha in July.

Cuban state television announced that all buses and trains to and from Havana were suspended, as was ferry service to the Isla de Juventud, the outlying Cuban island next in Gustav's path.

Authorities announced they were prepared to "protect" the 20,000 tourists in Matanzas province, which includes the famous beach resort of Varadero.

Gustav rolled over the Cayman Islands Friday with fierce winds that tore down trees and power lines.

At first light Saturday, Associated Press journalists found that Grand Cayman island was spared major damage. Big surging waves pounded at the island, but there was little flooding, and wind damage was limited because islanders had removed signs and other items that could blow away.

"The wind was a little nerve-wracking, the howling. But it turned out OK," said Meagan Call, who rode out the hurricane in her hotel room. She had come to George Town from the U.S. Embassy in Jamaica to assist U.S. citizens here.

Most tourists had fled before Gustav arrived. Dan Waters, general manager of the Marriott Courtyard in George Town, said the number of guests dropped from 200 to just 34, and they were stayed in second-floor rooms overnight.

Gustav was expected to cross Cuba's cigar country Saturday and head into the Gulf of Mexico by Sunday.

Haiti's Interior Ministry on Saturday raised the hurricane death toll there to 66 from 59. Gustav also killed eight people in the Dominican Republic and four in Jamaica.

In the Cayman Islands, Gustav's heavy rains and storm surge flooded the streets of Cayman Cayman Brac and Little Cayman, the smaller easternmost "Sister Islands" in the chain.

Two people were knocked down by huge waves as they tried to take pictures of the storm on Little Cayman, but there were no other immediate reports of injuries, said Hemant Balgobin, disaster manager for the Red Cross in the British territory.

"Things weren't really as bad as they could have been," he said.

More than 1,100 people spent the night in government shelters in the three islands as high waves and heavy winds battered the chain, the National Emergency Operations Center said in a statement. Most people hunkered down in private homes or hotels.

By early Saturday, Gustav's eye had left the Caymans behind and was about 225 miles (360 kilometers) east-southeast of the western tip of Cuba and just 85 miles (135 kilometers) east of the Isla de Juventud. It was expected to be moving northwest near 12 mph (19 kph).

Gustav could strike the U.S. Gulf coast anywhere from the Florida Panhandle to Texas, but forecasters said there is a better-than-even chance that New Orleans will get slammed by at least tropical-storm-force winds.

As much as 80 percent of the Gulf of Mexico's oil and gas production could be shut down as a precaution if Gustav enters as a major storm, weather research firm Planalytics predicted. Oil companies have already evacuated hundreds of workers from offshore platforms.

Retail gas prices rose Friday for the first time in 43 days as analysts warned that a direct hit on Gulf energy infrastructure could send pump prices hurtling toward \$5 a gallon. Crude oil prices ended slightly lower in a volatile session as some traders feared supply disruptions and others bet the U.S. government will release supplies from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve.

Meanwhile, Tropical Storm Hanna was projected to curl westward into the Bahamas by early next week — and could eventually threaten Cuba. It had sustained winds near 50 mph (85 kph) early Saturday.

Along the U.S. Gulf Coast, most commemorations of the Katrina anniversary were canceled because of Gustav, but in New Orleans a horse-drawn carriage took the bodies of Katrina's last seven unclaimed victims to burial.

President Bush declared an emergency in Louisiana, a move that allows the federal government to coordinate disaster relief and provide assistance in storm-affected areas.

New Orleans officials announced possible evacuation plans and some people began leaving the city early. The Federal Emergency Management Agency said it expects a "huge number" of Gulf Coast residents will be told to leave the region this weekend.

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