

3 dead, no power for 3.3 million as Hurricane Irma batters Florida

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Miami: Hurricane Irma which made landfall in Florida on Sunday as Category 4 storm with winds up to 130 mph (209 kmph) has come down to a Category 2 with winds of 105 mph (177 kmph). The Hurricane on Sunday gave Florida a coast-to-coast pummeling, swamping homes and boats, toppling massive construction cranes over the Miami skyline and causing power outages affecting at least 3.3 million homes and businesses across the state.

A person walks through a street lined with debris and fallen trees

Nearly 6.4 million people were told to evacuate Florida, with warnings of a huge storm surge that would be "life-threatening" to anyone in its path.

Widespread destruction, three dead

The 400-mile-wide (640-kilometer-wide) storm blew ashore in the morning in the mostly cleared-out Florida Keys, then began a slow march up the state's west coast, its punishing winds extending clear across to Miami and West Palm Beach on the Atlantic side. The Hurricane that left a trail of death and destruction across the Caribbean has also claimed three lives in Florida.

A man in Monroe County, which encompasses Key West, was killed after he lost control of a truck that carried a generator as winds whipped at tropical-storm strength, officials said.

Two other people, including a sheriff's deputy, died in a car crash in the rain in Hardee County, officials said. The sheriff's deputy, identified as Julie Bridges, was a 13-year veteran of the Hardee County force, Hardee County Sheriff Arnold Lanier was quoted as saying by ABC News.

Miami and Tampa appeared "ghost towns" as nervous residents, many of whom struggled to cope with abandoning their homes, moved to safer places following mandatory evacuation notices.

Irma has already devastated parts of the Caribbean with 25 deaths. About 60 Indian nationals are being evacuated from the vacation island of St Martin in the Caribbean.

Irma was expected to hit the heavily populated Tampa-St. Petersburg area early Monday, though in a much-weakened state. While it arrived in Florida a Category 4 hurricane, by nightfall it was down to a Category 2 with winds of 105 mph (177 kph). The eye of the Category 4 storm was 24 kilometres southeast of Key West.

An apparent tornado spun off by Irma destroyed six mobile homes in Palm Bay, midway up the Atlantic coast. Flooding was reported along Interstate 4, which cuts across Florida's midsection.

In downtown Miami, two of the two dozen construction cranes looming over the skyline collapsed in the wind. No injuries were reported. City officials said it would have taken about two weeks to move the massive equipment.

At least 3.3 million homes and businesses across the state lost power, and utility officials said it will take weeks to restore electricity to everyone.

While Irma raked Florida's Gulf Coast, forecasters warned that the entire state "including the Miami metropolitan area of 6 million people" was in danger because of the sheer size of the storm.

Nearly 7 million people in the Southeast were warned to evacuate, including 6.4 million in Florida alone.

About 30,000 people heeded orders to leave the Keys as the storm closed in, but an untold number refused, in part because to many storm-hardened residents, staying behind in the face of danger is a point of pride.

John Huston, who stayed in his Key Largo home, watched his yard flood even before the arrival of high tide.

"Small boats floating down the street next to furniture and refrigerators. Very noisy," he said by text message. "Shingles are coming off."

Irma made landfall just after 9 a.m. at Cudjoe Key, about 20 miles outside Key West. During the afternoon, it rounded Florida's southwestern corner and hugged the coast closely as it pushed toward Naples, Sanibel, Fort Myers and, beyond that, Sarasota, at 14 mph (23 kph).

Forecasters warned some places could see a storm surge of up to 15 feet of water.

Some 400 miles north of the Keys, people in the Tampa-St. Petersburg area started bracing for the onslaught. The Tampa Bay area, with a population of about 3 million, has not taken a direct hit from a major hurricane since 1921.

After leaving Florida, a weakened Irma is expected to push into Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee and beyond. A tropical storm warning was issued for the first time ever in Atlanta, some 200 miles from the sea.

Irma at one time was the most powerful hurricane ever recorded in the open Atlantic, a Category 5 with a peak wind speed of 185 mph (300 kph), and its approach set off alarm in Florida.

For days, forecasters had warned that Irma was taking dead aim at the Miami area and the rest of the state's Atlantic coast.

But then Irma made a more pronounced westward shift that put a bull's-eye on the Tampa area "the result of what meteorologists said was an atmospheric tug-of-war between weather systems that nudged Irma and determined

when it made its crucial right turn into Florida.

Curfews were imposed in Miami, Tampa, Fort Lauderdale and much of the rest of South Florida, and some arrests of violators were reported. Miami Beach barred outsiders from the island.

Fort Lauderdale police arrested nine people they said were caught on TV cameras looting sneakers and other items from a sporting goods store and a pawn shop during the hurricane.

Army, Florida National Guard deployed

President Donald Trump approved a disaster declaration for Florida, opening the way for federal aid.

“Once this system passes through, it’s going to be a race to save lives and sustain lives,” Federal Emergency Management Agency chief Brock Long said on “Fox News Sunday.”

Florida Governor Rick Scott asked people to move out of the danger zones as soon as possible. “The state has never seen anything like this. The storm’s surge can kill you.”

The Governor activated all 7,000 members of the Florida National Guard, and 10,000 guardsmen from elsewhere were being deployed.

The US Army has so far deployed more than 7,400 soldiers and US Army Corps of Engineers civilians on the US Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and the continental US.

The Pentagon said the Army has over 140 aircraft, 650 trucks, 150 boats prepared along with additional resources on standby.

Indian-Americans open homes, missions set up helpline

Indian-Americans in Atlanta and neighbouring areas today opened up their homes for their friends, families and community members from Florida, as catastrophic hurricane Irma made landfall on the state’s southern islands.

Around 120,000 Indian-Americans reside across Florida while thousands of them live in the now-dangerous zones of Miami, Fort Lauderdale and Tampa.

The Indian Embassy in the US has opened a round-the-clock helpline number and rushed senior diplomats to Atlanta to lead relief efforts for Indian-Americans stuck in the region.

The hotline number is 202-258-8819.

Embassy officials said India's Ambassador to the US Navtej Sarna was closely monitoring the situation.

Sandeep Chakravorty, India's Consul General in New York, was in Atlanta overseeing preparation for relief efforts from a 24X7 control room.

The Indian Consulate in Atlanta tweeted helpline numbers (+14044052567 & +1678179393) for people seeking assistance.

"Atlanta is fully prepared to take care of evacuees from Florida. Some have already reached. Consulate is on call 24x7," it said in another tweet.

External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Raveesh Kumar has also tweeted 24X7 helpline at High Commission of India, Kingston (+1876 833 4500; +1876 564 1378). He also tweeted email ids for Indians to contact in case of emergency: hc.Kingston@mea.Gov.In; hoc.Kingston@mea.Gov.In.

The Indian Friends of Atlanta -- in association with the Consulate-General of India, the Gujarat Samaj Atlanta and the Hindu Temple of Atlanta -- have operationalised three shelters.

They were preparing to open more shelters and provide food. Several Indian businesses have started contributing to relief efforts.

The Indian Embassy in Venezuela tweeted the helpline number in Aruba, a tiny Dutch Caribbean island off the coast of Venezuela, for the situation in Sint Maarten: 00297-593- 2552.

The helpline numbers in Curacao, a Dutch Caribbean island, is 005999-513-2407; 005999-690-2686.

The Indian Embassy in the Netherlands said countrymen affected by Irma can reach them on: 0031643743800.

Those affected in Cuba, Dominican Republic and Haiti can contact Indian authorities on emergency no. +5352131818 or email them at: controlroomindiairma@gmail.Com.

- (With agencies)