

U.S.

# Harvey Floods Houston, Strands Thousands

Five fatalities are reported in the area as officials warn that 911 services are at capacity

*By Bradley Olson, Arian Campo-Flores and Miguel Bustillo*

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HOUSTON—The nation's fourth-largest city and surrounding areas faced epic flooding and days more of heavy rain from Tropical Storm Harvey, which turned freeways and roads into rivers, inundated homes and required rescues for thousands of stranded people.

"This disaster will be a landmark event. FEMA will be there for years," Federal Emergency Management Agency administrator William Long said on CNN.

Five deaths believed to be storm-related had been reported in the Houston area as of Sunday evening, and more than 3,000 water rescues had been performed, officials said. Bands of the storm repeatedly lashed the flood-prone city, spawning numerous tornadoes and pouring as much as 24 inches of rain in 24 hours onto areas that had been soaked the previous day.

More rain was forecast in the coming days; the city could receive a total of as much as 50 inches of rain—about equal to its annual average total. The disaster swamped businesses, including patches of the energy industry, and will disrupt travel this week.

The White House said President Donald Trump plans to travel to Texas on Tuesday to survey the damage.

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner on Sunday said only one death in the city was confirmed so far as storm-related. He said a woman drove into high water in southwest Houston and drowned while trying to escape.

Even in a city accustomed to flooding and bracing for the impact of the storm, the rapidly rising waters caught many off-guard, raising questions about whether the city should have been evacuated.

"No one thought it would be this bad," said Aeisha Brimzy, a stay-at-home mom plucked from the rising waters around her apartment building by constables, who also rescued her six daughters,

mother and sister. The family went to the George R. Brown Convention Center downtown, which the city had turned into a giant evacuation center.

Rescued families sat on folding chairs or laid on the floor, many still clutching white towels they had been given with which to dry off as they received assistance from the Red Cross.

Mr. Turner said the city was also opening libraries, community centers and other locations as “lily pads” to provide safe harbor from the waters in neighborhoods.

“This is a storm that is testing the city of Houston,” he said.

Most rescues were from vehicles that got stranded after driving into floodwaters, with responders assisting on foot, in large vehicles, by boat and via helicopters.

By Sunday morning, officials warned that 911 services were at capacity and urged people to take whatever steps they could to find safety. When their calls couldn’t get through, families issued pleas over social media for help.

Wireless networks along the Texas coast suffered outages, federal regulators said, leaving customers in some counties with limited or no cellphone service.

State officials said Sunday evening that a widespread power outage caused a sewage overflow into a Corpus Christi creek.

The U.S. Coast Guard said its Houston sector had received more than 300 requests for urban search and rescue and was asking for additional HH-60 Jayhawk Helicopters from New Orleans and Air National Guard support to assist its current five MH-65 Dolphin Helicopters conducting rescues in the area.

“This is historic, devastating rainfall,” said Jeff Lindner, a meteorologist for the Harris County Flood Control District who is working with emergency personnel. “There is water in homes that have never flooded before, and we’ve received reports of water going into the second story of homes.”

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott warned on Sunday afternoon that the worst of the flooding might not be over, with more days of heavy rain forecast. “This likely is going to be a historic rainfall, if not an all-time record.”

Mr. Abbott and other state officials have disagreed over the past few days with local Houston officials about whether the region should be evacuated. On Friday, Mr. Abbott urged coastal residents, including residents of Houston, to “strongly consider evacuating.” But city officials said that wasn’t necessary.

Mr. Turner defended the decision not to order a mandatory evacuation, saying it would have been more dangerous for so many residents to try to travel through the heavy rains. Harvey was also pummeling San Antonio and Austin, the logical locations for fleeing Houstonians.

“You cannot put, in the city of Houston, 2.3 million people on the road,” said Mr. Turner, a Democrat. “You give an order to evacuate, you are creating a nightmare.”

Harris County Judge Ed Emmett, the area’s top emergency official, asked citizens with boats to help rescue people trapped by rising water in their neighborhoods. Boats and other vehicles the city hoped to receive from the state couldn’t arrive because roads were blocked by flooding, he said.

He also said Ben Taub Hospital, Houston’s main public hospital, was being evacuated because of flooding in its basement. Later, Bayshore Medical Center in Pasadena, Tex., on the outskirts of Houston, said it was evacuating nearly 200 patients because of rising water.

Mr. Emmett, a Republican, bristled at criticism that the city should have evacuated.

“To suggest we should have evacuated two million people is an outrageous statement. What we’re facing now is an effort to respond to a tragedy....We’ve never seen water like this before,” he said.

Forecasters said the storm might drop even more rain than initially expected over Texas.

More than 150 roadways were flooded throughout Houston on Sunday, and both of Houston’s airports closed.

Tristan Berlanga was preparing to move his family to another home they own on higher ground in the neighborhood. He said with another two feet of floodwater, the first house would begin taking it on. He said he was also concerned about a natural-gas leak in the neighborhood, where the smell of gas was noticeable.

“I’ve lived in Houston for 30 years and I’ve never seen anything like this,” Mr. Berlanga said.

The mass flooding was reminiscent of Tropical Storm Allison in 2001, which killed more than 20 people in the Houston region, destroyed more than 2,700 homes and caused billions of dollars in damage.

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## Photos: Tropical Storm Harvey Causes Record Flooding in Texas

The tropical storm dumped more than 50 inches of rain in parts of Texas in a new record for the contiguous U.S.



Floodwaters from Tropical Storm Harvey surround homes and businesses in Port Arthur, Texas, on Thursday. GERALD HERBERT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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### HURRICANE HARVEY RELIEF EFFORTS

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To make a financial donation to Hurricane Harvey relief efforts contact these charities:

- The United Way of Greater Houston: Visit [www.unitedwayhouston.org/flood](http://www.unitedwayhouston.org/flood) or text UWFLOOD to 41444.
  - American Red Cross: Visit [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org), call 1-800-RED-CROSS or text the word Harvey to 90999 to make a \$10 donation.
  - Salvation Army: Visit [www.helpsalvationarmy.org](http://www.helpsalvationarmy.org), call 1-800-SAL-ARMY or text STORM to 51555.
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As has occurred two other times in recent years, including during the Memorial Day holiday in 2015, the city's bayous and creeks, meant as a drainage system, failed to withstand the onslaught from a tremendous downpour.

The impending danger from continued rainfall will be made worse by several factors that have contributed to major flooding events in recent years in the city. While excessive rainfall has been a primary trigger, some of the challenge, as with flooding in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, is of the man-made variety.

The city has added an average of more than 30,000 people a year since 2010, which has brought about a building boom. That boom has covered previous flood-absorbing land with concrete for apartment buildings and other developments.

Flood protection has also failed to keep pace with the construction. The city's regulations aren't in line with the kinds of storms it has seen of late, said experts such as Samuel Brody, director of Texas A&M University's Institute for Sustainable Coastal Communities in Galveston.

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