

SARASOTA, Fla. — Hurricane Milton crashed into Florida with drenching rain, driving wind and a surge of seawater on Wednesday, menacing millions in a state still recovering from Hurricane Helene's fury less than two weeks ago.

Milton's eye made landfall just south of Sarasota at about 8:30 p.m. The storm was forecast to pack hurricane-force winds all night long as the center plowed inland, crossed the Orlando region and headed toward the Atlantic coast. It was threatening to bring up to 18 inches of rain over parts of the Florida peninsula.

Forecasters warned that a dangerous storm surge of up to 13 feet could swamp low-lying communities along more than 70 miles of Florida's western coastline.

Parts of Sanibel Island, about 20 miles southwest of Fort Myers, were already flooding, according to the fire chief, Kevin Barbot, who warned residents earlier in the day that if they did not leave, "your life is in danger."

Cellphones blared with warnings as the hurricane marched across Florida. In Orlando, the rain was coming down in sheets as cars splashed through pools of water on the highway, and many gas stations were out of fuel. People huddled in the entryway of a Wawa gas station that still had fuel, moments after a tornado warning was issued, one of many that flashed across the state.

"It's getting worse," one employee said as she went to stock shelves.

More than 770,000 customers across Florida had lost power as of Wednesday evening, according to PowerOutage.us, which tracks outages. Many of those customers were on the state's Gulf coast, in Pinellas, Hillsborough and Manatee counties.

Gov. Ron DeSantis said that 149 emergency shelters were open, housing about 31,000 people but with room for nearly 200,000. More than 50,000 utility workers and 8,000 National Guard troops were ready to respond to the hurricane, he said, part of what he called the largest deployment of personnel and resources for a storm in the state's history.

Milton exploded in strength earlier this week, rapidly becoming one of the most intense hurricanes on record in the Atlantic basin, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. As of Wednesday evening, it had weakened slightly but was still a Category 3 hurricane with wind speeds of 115 mph.

As Milton arrived, at least six tornadoes touched down between Martin and Brevard counties on Florida's Atlantic coast, according to Jessie Schaper, a forecaster in the National Weather Service's office in Melbourne. Authorities reported damage to houses in Stuart and to a garage belonging to the St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office.

More than 5 million people had been told to leave their homes before Milton arrived, including many who live in coastal and low-lying areas of Tampa, St. Petersburg and

Clearwater. Many appeared to have heeded those orders, as they jammed roads and emptied gas stations over the past several days.

“We’re all in the same boat, and the boat is flooding,” said Chris Granson Sr., 74, who had evacuated from a barrier island off Clearwater to a Holiday Inn Express & Suites in Wesley Chapel, about 40 miles away. He was part of a group of evacuees who were hanging out in the hotel lobby, including four women who split Champagne and chocolates while playing cards.

“We’re laughing and bonding, trying not to watch too much news,” said Rosemary O’Hara, 69. “We know something bad is happening out there, and we’ll face it when we return. But for now, we’re focusing on what matters.”

All across the state, residents and officials had made final preparations to try to limit the damage.

In Orlando, crews had drained lakes to prevent flooding. Hospitals, clinics and nursing homes on the west coast of Florida had closed or put up barricades, and some had evacuated patients and canceled surgeries.

At MacDill Air Force Base, which juts into Tampa Bay, personnel had evacuated and planes were flown to McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas. MacDill, which houses the headquarters of the U.S. Special Operations Command and the U.S. Central Command, is only about 14 feet above sea level.

Milton was arriving less than two weeks after Hurricane Helene destroyed thousands of homes in Florida and then flooded communities, downed electrical lines and damaged roads and bridges across a wide swath of the southeastern United States. Many towns in Florida were still littered with debris from Helene.

The federal response to that hurricane has become an issue in the presidential race, with the election less than a month away and more damage expected from Milton. On Wednesday, President Joe Biden accused former President Donald Trump of spreading lies about the government’s response to Helene.

“The last few weeks, there’s been a reckless, irresponsible and relentless promotion of disinformation and outright lies,” Biden said as he participated in a briefing from federal officials about Hurricane Milton. “It’s undermining confidence in the incredible rescue and recovery work that has already been taken and will continue to be taken. It’s harmful to those who need help the most.”

Trump, who is seeking a second term in the White House, and his running mate, Sen. JD Vance of Ohio, have made accusations about the government’s response that have repeatedly been debunked by local, state and federal authorities.

Trump said at a Michigan rally that his Democratic opponent, Vice President Kamala Harris, had spent Federal Emergency Management Agency money on housing

migrants. He said no helicopters had been used to rescue people in North Carolina. And he has claimed that FEMA told victims of the storm they would receive only \$750.

All of those claims are false, and part of what Biden on Wednesday called a “disturbing” pattern of comments.

Although Milton was battering Florida’s Gulf coast first, people on the Atlantic coast had rushed to prepare as well. Residents of St. Augustine, a tourist destination known for its Spanish colonial and Moorish-style architecture, moved to taller buildings. Ormond Beach residents received text messages warning them to leave before a bridge over the Halifax River closed.

Some of those who fled went north to the grounds of the North Florida Fair in Tallahassee, where dozens of cars, trucks, SUVs and campers were parked in the grass.

Jayleena Bizzell, 45, had arrived there with her two daughters after driving about four hours from St. Petersburg, riding on the shoulder of the road, which had been opened to ease traffic.

After Milton strengthened into a “monster storm” earlier this week, Bizzell said, “I wanted to get as far as I could from it.” She said her family planned to spend the night in her car.

The hurricane was too much for April Fore, 49, who moved from Indiana to Orlando just a few months ago. She said she was “freaking out” when Helene hit last month, and she planned to move to California after Milton.

“It’s too scary,” she said at a temporary shelter at Carver Middle School in Orlando.

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