



## OFFICIALS ASSESS DAMAGE IN WAKE OF HURRICANE RITA

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*Police and other emergency workers continue to search flooded communities in Louisiana and Texas for those stranded after Hurricane Rita caused widespread flooding but less damage than Hurricane Katrina, which struck less than a month ago.*

Hurricane Rita plowed into the Gulf Coast along the Texas-Louisiana border early Saturday morning, packing 150 mph wind gusts and 15-foot waves. Making landfall as a Category 3 storm, Rita quickly weakened to a Category 1 storm by mid-morning.

Although weaker and faster moving than Katrina, which devastated parts of Louisiana and Mississippi four weeks ago, Rita caused heavy damage to the cities of Lake Charles, La. and Beaumont, Texas. Officials said the massive evacuation of more than 3 million people from the Gulf Coast region had saved countless lives. As of Sunday night, only two people had been confirmed killed by Rita as opposed to more than 1,000 who died in Katrina.

"As bad as it could have been, we came out of this in pretty good shape," said Texas Governor Rick Perry, who called the lack of widespread fatalities "miraculous."

### **Damage**

In Cameron Parish, on the Louisiana/Texas line, fishing communities were reduced to splinters by the worst of Rita's winds. Debris was reportedly strewn for miles by water or wind.

"In Cameron, there's really hardly anything left. Everything is just obliterated," Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco said Sunday.

Hundreds of thousands of trees were downed across the region, knocking out utilities, including water, electric and telecommunications to thousands of residents, the Washington Post reported.

Local authorities urged those who had fled to remain away until more repairs could be made to roads, power lines and other infrastructure.

"This is not a livable place," Dick Nugent, mayor of Nederland, south of Beaumont, told the Washington Post. "We do not have water yet. We do not have power yet. All we have is a mess."

## **New Orleans**

In New Orleans, a lighter than expected rainfall spared much of the Katrina-battered city from another major flood. Only about 3 inches fell in the city, but a major storm surge of 6 to 9 feet breeched at least one of the city's levees, sending several feet of water back into the deserted Ninth Ward, a poorer part of the city that was flooded by 30 feet of water in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

"Overall, it looks like New Orleans has lucked out in that they didn't get the heaviest rainfall," meteorologist Phil Grigsby told the Associated Press.

In fact, the situation had improved to the point where New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin decided Monday to allow people to return to some of the less damaged neighborhoods in the city.

"With Hurricane Rita behind us, the task at hand is to bring New Orleans back," he said. "We want people to return and help us rebuild the city. However, we want everyone to assess the risks and make an informed decision about re-entry plans."

## **President Bush**

President Bush, who was widely criticized for his and the government's sluggish response to Katrina, received numerous briefings on the track and fallout of the storm Saturday and was in Louisiana Sunday for briefings with state officials.

"Our federal government is well organized and well prepared to deal with Rita," President Bush said. "The first order of business now is search and rescue teams -- to pull people out of harm's way," he said.

Although the damage from Rita was minor compared to Katrina, experts still say the cost of repairing the businesses and homes wrecked by the storm could be enormous.

CNN/Money reported Monday that early damage estimates from three major catastrophe risk modeling companies put insured losses at between \$2.5 billion to \$7 billion in eastern Texas and western Louisiana.

*--Compiled from wire reports and other media sources*

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