

The Washington Post

Evacuees Return To Power Outages

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Thursday, September 4, 2008

NEW ORLEANS, Sept. 3 -- Hundreds of thousands of Gustav evacuees began flooding back home on Wednesday to face widespread power outages, food shortages and limited medical care.

Facing rising pressure from those who had left, officials in most jurisdictions along the Gulf Coast began lifting evacuation orders even as they expressed serious reservations about conditions that returning residents would face. In particular, officials warned the sick and elderly to stay away.

"We'd like to say 'welcome back,' but it's not the way we'd like to do it -- with no electricity, no traffic lights," Aaron Broussard, president of Jefferson Parish, told a local television station.

In contrast to 2005, when Hurricane Katrina struck and many people stayed away for months, virtually all of the nearly 2 million people evacuated from southern Louisiana are expected to return in the next few days, potentially overwhelming the area's infrastructure as it slowly recovers from the storm. Officials estimated that the storm caused as much as \$15 billion in economic losses.

Highways and other roads leading back into areas that had been evacuated became jammed Wednesday as evacuees headed home. In New Orleans, early returnees had a hard time finding supplies, particularly gasoline.

State officials said that 1.2 million residential and business customers are still without power in southern Louisiana, mainly because of downed transmission and distribution lines. Power outages in Jefferson County's sewage plants have prompted officials there to ask residents of the New Orleans suburb not to use any water, because it could cause massive sewage backups in homes and businesses.

Of major concern to officials is the number of hospitals operating on emergency generators and what they have called the slow pace of power restoration.

Virtually all of Baton Rouge, the state capital, is without electricity. Fifty-seven percent of customers in New Orleans are without power. In some jurisdictions, utilities have said it could be weeks before power is restored.

At a news conference Wednesday, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal (R) expressed frustration at the pace of the power restoration, calling it "unacceptable."

"There is no excuse for delay," he said. "We absolutely need to quicken the pace of which power is being restored."

President Bush, who toured the area on Wednesday, added his voice to the sense of urgency, asking utilities in neighboring states to work with Louisiana to send extra manpower.

But Philip Allison, spokesman for Entergy, the main electric utility in the region, said more than 10,000 workers from Entergy, its contractors and other out-of-state utilities are already at work.

"If we do need more, I know we'll ask for them," he said. Allison said any delay was caused by the "size and scope of the damage" from Gustav. "There are very few, if any, areas of the state that were not affected," he said.

Hospitals without power and running on generators are either being provided additional generators or having critical-care patients moved to other facilities, according to Jolie Adams, spokeswoman for the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals.

Chris Wormuth, a doctor at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Gonzales, La., said he is concerned about the 100-bed hospital and clinic, which is using emergency generators.

"We're open for the moment," Wormuth said. "But how long we can stay open we're not sure."

At least 10 people were killed in the storm.

To forestall the looting that plagued the city after Katrina, 1,500 National Guard troops patrolled New Orleans on Wednesday, guarding gas stations, grocery stores and pharmacies and handing out ice at some locations.

At one of the few open gas stations in downtown New Orleans, owner Harry Leslie surveyed a line of cars and remarked, "I am shocked I'm this busy. I guess I am one of the few open." But he said his supply is running low. "I'll stay open as long as I have gas, but it is not looking good."

As residents returned to spoiled food and shuttered grocery stores, relief organizations began moving in. Churches that have power are beginning feeding efforts, and the Salvation Army is operating 65 feeding trucks along the Gulf Coast, a spokesman said, with the ability to feed 560,000 people a day.

Good Samaritans were also in action.

David Mansel took his dog, Clifford, to fill gas cans, then drive along Interstate 10 to help stranded people. "I am not looking for the money. I just remembered from last time hearing how people ran out of gas."

Within a few hours, he came upon a couple trying to get back from Mississippi. They had run out of gas, and Mansel gave them five gallons for their van.

During Bush's brief appearance in Baton Rouge, he said his administration had approved a request by Citgo to release 250,000 barrels of crude oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve.

New Orleans originally planned to admit evacuees by phases, with major corporations and retailers permitted to return Wednesday and the general populace on Thursday. But after scenes of frustrated evacuees stuck at police checkpoints, New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin dropped the phased reentry system.

Anyone with identification showing residency in the New Orleans metropolitan area was allowed into the city, and police began waving residents through checkpoints on roads leading into the city.

Many evacuees expressed relief at finding only minor damage to their homes, in comparison to the devastation that greeted them when they returned after Hurricane Katrina.

"Everything is fine," said the Rev. Larry Payton, 53, who lives in the West Bank section of New Orleans. "Now I'm just waiting for power."

In New Orleans, Dawn and Dax Bordenave arrived at a Salvation Army truck after it ran out of food. They had only hot dogs, milk and bread with them and were anxious about the conditions in New Orleans in the coming days. "It's the uncertainty," Dawn said. "We don't know what's open. That's the scary part."

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