

U.S.

Damage and Flooding Scar Atlantic Seaboard

By KIM SEVERSON, DAN BARRY and CAMPBELL ROBERTSON AUG. 27, 2011

This article was reported by Kim Severson, Dan Barry and Campbell Robertson and was written by Mr. Barry.

COINJOCK, N.C. — Weakened but unbowed, Hurricane Irene churned up the Atlantic Seaboard early Sunday toward a battened-down New York City, where officials had taken what were called the unprecedented steps of evacuating low-lying areas and shutting down the mass transit system in advance of the storm's expected midmorning arrival on Sunday.

Announcing itself with howling winds and hammering rains, the hurricane made landfall at Cape Lookout, on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, at about 7:30 a.m., ending several days of anxious anticipation and beginning who knows how many more days of response and cleanup. Downed and denuded trees. Impassable roadways. Damaged municipal buildings. Widespread flooding. The partial loss of a modest civic center's roof, forcing the relocation of dozens of people who had found shelter there.

Along the Atlantic Seaboard, and most particularly in New York, officials

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In Nags Head, N.C., on the Outer Banks, Saturday began with surging waves eating away at the dunes, while winds peeled the siding from vacated beach houses — as if to challenge the National Hurricane Center's early morning decision to downgrade Irene to a Category 1 hurricane, whose maximum sustained winds would reach only — only — 90 miles an hour, with occasional stronger gusts.

The hurricane also quickly contributed to at least nine deaths. In Maryland, a person in Queen Anne's County died after a tree fell on a house, The Associated Press reported. In North Carolina, five people died: one whose car hydroplaned and hit a tree, one was hit by a falling tree limb, a third died when a tree fell on their car, another was killed in a car accident and one had a heart attack while nailing up plywood. Three more people died in Virginia: in Newport News, a fallen tree crashed through the roof of an apartment building and killed an 11-year-old boy; in Brunswick County, a tree fell on a car and killed a man; and the most recent death was caused by toppled trees.

By early Sunday, the massive storm was continuing north at about 17 miles an hour — speeding up slightly — and producing tornado watches and warnings from Delaware to New York City. Laurie Hogan, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service's operations on Long Island, said that the storm was expected to hit a little after 8 a.m. on Sunday. It was expected to cause storm surges of seven feet at the southern tip of Staten Island, and of more than five feet at Battery Park, at the bottom of Manhattan.

By Sunday evening, Ms. Hogan said, southern Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York will have received as much as nine inches of rain. Flooding is a particular concern, she added, because the ground in New Jersey, for example, is already saturated from heavy rains over the last month.

In its latest forecast, the National Hurricane Center said that the storm would remain a hurricane as it surged into New England on Sunday.

New York City had ordered the evacuation of about 370,000 residents in areas where officials expected flooding to follow the storm, including in Battery Park City

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said was the first time in history. Officials in Boston announced late Saturday that no buses, subways or commuter trains in the metropolitan area would be in service all day on Sunday, either. In Maryland, after high winds reached about 55 m.p.h., the Chesapeake Bay Bridge was closed, officials there said. Closures of other bridges would follow.

Mayor Bloomberg said mass transit in New York was “unlikely to be back” in service on Monday.

Federal, state and local officials along the East Coast strongly recommended that people not be fooled into complacency by the hurricane’s loss of wind speed once it made landfall. They said that a central concern was the storm surge of such a large, slow-moving hurricane — the deluge to be dumped from the sky or thrown onto shore by violent waves moving like snapped blankets.

“I would very much take this seriously,” Brian McNoldy, a research associate of the department of atmospheric research at Colorado State University, said. “Don’t be concerned if it’s a Category 1, 2, 3, 4. If you’re on the coast, you don’t want to be there. Wind isn’t your problem.”

Mazie Swindell Smith, the county manager in Hyde County, N.C., which was expecting storm surge from the inland bay that abuts it, agreed. “The storm is moving more slowly than expected,” Ms. Smith said. “That’s not good as far as rainfall, because it will just sit here and dump rain.”

With the first hurricane to make landfall in the continental United States since 2008, government officials issued evacuation orders for about 2.3 million people, according to The Associated Press — from 100,000 people in Delaware to 1 million people in New Jersey, where the governor, Chris Christie, seemed to speak for all concerned public officials when he told everyone to “get the hell off the beach.” In addition to the evacuations being ordered in New York City, county and town officials on Long Island were ordering about 400,000 people to do the same, with some police officers going door to door to ensure cooperation.

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states of emergency. Amtrak canceled all train service in the Northeast, while airlines canceled thousands of flights and Newark Liberty International Airport, Kennedy International Airport and La Guardia Airport shut down.

Major League Baseball postponed games. Broadway plays went dark in deference to nature's more dramatic production. And, if Cairo Wine and Liquor in Washington is any measure, liquor stores enjoyed brisk, storm-related business. ("It's like New Year's Eve," Gary Lyles, an employee, said. "They're buying everything. Wine. Beer. Even water.")

The Federal Emergency Management Agency, still seeking to redeem itself from its spotty performance after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, had 18 disaster-response teams in place along the East Coast, with stockpiles of food, water and mobile communications equipment ready to go. The Coast Guard: more than 20 rescue helicopters and reconnaissance planes ready to take off. The Defense Department: 6,500 active duty military personnel poised for deployment. The National Guard: about 101,000 members available to respond. The American Red Cross: more than 200 emergency response vehicles and tens of thousands of ready-to-eat meals in areas due to be hit by the storm.

And President Obama: back early in Washington from his vacation in Martha's Vineyard, and issuing federal emergency declarations for North Carolina, Virginia, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and New Hampshire. The declarations clear the way for federal support in responding to the hurricane's aftermath, which could affect more than 50 million people and cause significant financial harm.

For most of Saturday, though, other states along the Atlantic Seaboard could do little more than see their own reflection in the toll being exacted by the hurricane in its first victims, North Carolina and Virginia. Early Sunday, more than 1.8 million customers were without power from North Carolina through parts of Delaware, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

In North Carolina, the communities of Wrightsville Beach and Carolina Beach

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the police to suspend the search for a teenage boy who had jumped off a boat ramp and into the churning waters.

Officials in St. Mary's County, Md., which is southeast of Washington, warned that a dam on St. Mary's Lake near Callaway was in danger of spilling over the top and causing significant flooding, which would affect 28 homes downstream.

Power was out for about half of Wilmington's 106,000 residents. At the New Hanover Regional Medical Center, several dozen children had spent the night in sleeping bags and inflatable beds, arriving with staff members who had to work and parents from the area who wanted a safe place to wait the storm out.

After a night of fierce winds that gusted to nearly 80 miles an hour, people emerged from their homes to downed trees, darkened traffic lights — and a collective sense of having been spared the worst of the storm's wrath.

In the tiny hamlet of Swansboro, N.C., for example, about 30 miles west of where the hurricane made landfall, 80-mile-an-hour winds had stripped many trees of their foliage, sent tumbleweedlike balls of rain rolling down deserted streets and knocked out power. But the mayor, Scott Chadwick, expressed relief while sharing doughnuts with city workers at a local fire station after an afternoon that he described as "pretty rough."

"I'll tell you what, everybody's breathing a lot easier than they were," Mr. Chadwick said. "This could have been terrible."

But farther north, in Currituck County, close to the Virginia border, the dread of the approaching unknown mixed with the rain. .

Louis Davis, the owner of the Coinjock Marina and Restaurant, drove a pickup truck through his deserted community, as the wind jostled the vehicle and his cellphone rang with calls from worried boat owners. ("So far, so good, Cap," Mr. Davis said.) Then he returned to his marina, feeling buoyed by reports that the hurricane's direction had veered away from his business. Then he looked at the

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A couple of hours later, about 5:20, the storm's eye passed right over this small, unincorporated place, suddenly stilling the howling onslaught of wind and rain that had been driving the water of the Intracoastal Canal, on which the marina sits, into Albemarle Sound. Everything got quiet, which meant the problems were really getting started.

Up to this point, most people had experienced Hurricane Irene only through the multicolored radar maps that appeared on television. Or maybe they had seen the breathtaking, even humbling, images arriving from some 200 miles up, via the International Space Station: the photographs taken by astronauts that showed what looked like a massive swirl of mashed potatoes straddling the edge of the green plate of the United States.

But here, in Coinjack, the storm had dramatically moved from being a radar image to becoming a violent, roaring presence in the life of Mr. Davis, 40, a burly man in waders and a baseball cap, waiting for the rising waters to flood his dock shop and even his home.

With resignation and respect, he said: "It is what it is."

Kim Severson reported from Wilmington, N.C., Dan Barry from New York and Campbell Robertson from Coinjock, N.C. Reporting was contributed by Brian Stelter from Nags Head, N.C., Shaila Dewan from New York, Abby Goodnough from Boston, and Sabrina Tavernise and Eric Lipton from Washington.

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