

World and Nation

Gilbert batters Mexican coast after rampage across Yucatan

CAMPECHE, Mexico (AP) — Terrified people fled rising floodwaters in the predawn darkness Thursday as Hurricane Gilbert raged into the Gulf of Mexico after battering the Yucatan Peninsula and its posh resorts.

Gilbert, the strongest storm on record, left much of the Yucatan without communications, electricity or drinking water. Airports were closed, most roads were impassable and supplies were running short in many areas.

A top government official told the Associated Press that the Army was taking a portable communications tower and a satellite ground to Cancun Thursday.

He said the government hoped to have telephone, radio and television service restored within 24 hours.

The storm continued on its west-northwest path Thursday heading toward the lower Texas coast.

Sustained winds of 160 mph and 24-foot waves pounded the popular Caribbean resorts of Cancun and

Cozumel early Wednesday, inflicting heavy damage on hotels and stranding thousands of tourists.

As the 450-mile-wide storm charged into the Gulf of Mexico Thursday, it drenched the provincial capital of Merida and the gulf port cities of Puerto Progreso, Campeche and Ciudad del Carmen.

In Campeche, two babies drowned as residents of a poor, low-lying neighborhood tried to flee, said Oscar Sanchez, editor of the local newspaper, *Novedades de Campeche*.

Ramon Castillo, a nightwatchman at the paper, said, "There is no light, there is no radio, there is nothing."

"The whole city is flooded. Everything is dark. I've lived here all my life and I have never seen bad weather like this. People are scared," he said.

Sanchez said many people in Campeche had been reluctant to evacuate.

"People did not want to leave their homes especially after windows had broken and roofs had blown away. They were afraid of looting," he said.

"Nobody knows what is going on," Sanchez told the Associated Press in a telephone interview. "Even the Army and the Navy have not been able to establish communications. They were not prepared for this."

Military officials in Mexico City on Thursday refused all comment on the storm and its aftermath, referring all calls to the Interior Ministry.

The ministry, citing day-old reports, said Thursday that about 20,000 people were evacuated from Puerto Progreso and other coastal

towns. Hundreds of homes were destroyed, it added.

The ministry also said the storm seriously damaged the luxurious hotel zone in Cancun and destroyed about a quarter of the homes on the nearby island of Cozumel. There were reports of looting in Cancun after the storm and supplies were said to be running low.

Civil defense officials said 6,000 tourists left beachside motels and 30,000 local people also sought temporary shelter. The mayor put the total number of evacuees at about 11,000. The storm hit just before the height of the tourist season.

Despite the vast damage, Mexican officials said they had reports of only a handful of minor injuries. Many areas, however, remained cut off from the outside world and there were no comprehensive reports on injuries and property damage.

Authorities were particularly concerned about the situation on Isla Mujeres, a tiny resort just off Cancun.

A navy spokesman in Mexico City said he had no word on the plight of an estimated 15,000 people who had been stranded there. Three ferries linking the island with the mainland were lost in the storm, but there were no reports of casualties.

The storm, spawned Saturday southeast of Puerto Rico, appeared to have hit Jamaica the hardest. That island nation's prime minister, Edward Seaga, said Wednesday that it destroyed about 100,000 of Jamaica's 500,000 homes. He estimated damage at \$8 billion.

Communities plan to rekindle tourism

WEST YELLOWSTONE, Mont. (AP) — With Yellowstone National Park's wildfires still burning, the famous tourist attraction's gateway cities already are planning ways to lure visitors to the charred landmark next summer.

"The geysers are still there, the waterfalls are still there, the elk and bison and bears are still there, the streams and fish are still there," Suzanne Young, executive director of the Jackson, Wyo., Chamber of Commerce, said.

"Our job will be to get out the message that 'Yes, there is still the Yellowstone you love and remember, despite the forest fires.'"

While the key landmarks are still there, so is a mosaic of charred trees as a dozen enormous fires have blazed across nearly half of Yellowstone's 2.2 million acres in the past two months. The flames forced frequent evacuations of campgrounds and lodging facilities, and blanketed thousands of square miles with smoke.

The park's tiny gateway communities are vitally linked to the giant wilderness, which in a normal year attracts 3 million visitors. Towns with economies strongly dependent on Yellowstone include Gardiner, Silver Gate, Cooke City and West Yellowstone in Montana; Jackson and Cody in Wyoming; and, to a lesser degree, Driggs and Victor in Idaho.

Officials say that so far this year, tourist visits to Yellowstone are down 12.5 percent from last year's figures, a loss of more than a quarter million visitors.

Many merchants and innkeepers are wondering about the long-term economic impact of the worst fires in Yellowstone in 300 years.

Steve Tedder of park concessioner TW Services, which runs Yellowstone's lodging, restaurants and transportation services, said he expects sales to be down \$4 million to \$5 million — a 25 percent drop from last year.

"It certainly has been an interesting summer," he said wryly. "July and August traditionally are our biggest months, when we make up for the losses of our winter operation. It has been very dramatic — devastating from a visitor standpoint and an operations standpoint. To date, we've had to give early release to about 800 employees. I think it was by the grace of God that we have not lost any major structures."

John Olson, TW Services' marketing director, is busy accumulating videotape and photographs showing that many areas of the park are unaffected by the fires. He already has traveled to London to talk about Yellowstone with key tour group operators and newspaper travel editors.

In addition, some University of Wyoming students are using computer lists to contact tourists who canceled their reservations at Yellowstone, and find out why.

Federal officials ready for disaster

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal officials readied trucks, equipment and personnel Thursday for quick dispatch to the Texas Coast as Hurricane Gilbert aimed its deadly strength toward the Lone Star State.

"We are bringing every resource we have up to maximum operational capability in preparedness of relocating and mitigating this problem," Grant C. Peterson, in charge of the natural disaster program at the Federal Emergency Management Agency, said.

"It would be a virtual miracle if Texas is not hit," Sen. Phil Gramm, R-Texas, said during a briefing at FEMA, which is coordinating the unprecedented disaster readiness program with two dozen other agencies.

The Pentagon is also setting up a response team, Maj. Gen. J.D. Smith said, and procedures will be streamlined to ensure that this is not a "bureaucratic slow-moving turtle."

The Pentagon has agreed to dispatch active duty military personnel to back up the Texas National Guard if necessary.

"I think it is fair to say that we recognize that we face the greatest weather threat that we have ever faced in our part of the country. We want to be certain our preparation is up to the challenge," Gramm said.

Peterson and Gramm said paperwork had already been prepared to allow President Reagan to almost immediately issue a disaster declaration and set in motion relief efforts, paring away the five to seven days usually needed for a formal declaration.

"We are not going to wait around for the normal procedures; we are prepared now for action. We are acting now," Gramm said, adding that

officials were in constant communication with the office of Vice President George Bush.

Trucks at FEMA's Denton, Texas, regional headquarters north of Dallas are loaded down with gear such as communications equipment and electric generators and are prepared to move as soon as needed, Peterson said.

"They are ready to be dispatched as soon as we identify the location and where the need is," Peterson said.

FEMA officials said it was possible the trucks would be moved closer toward the shoreline if necessary. Meanwhile, evacuations were taking place along the Texas Coast, including South Padre Island and nearby Brownsville, and up the coast at Padre and Mustang islands.

"We are taking the hurricane very, very seriously, as we would urge all of the citizens in the area (to do)," Peterson said. "When you're in the eye of the storm, it's a little late to decide what to take and make sure your gas tank is full."

Peterson said federal agencies would also be dispatching Spanish-speaking personnel and Spanish-language forms and pamphlets to help communication with the sizeable Hispanic population along the coast.

Gramm said, "In terms of advance planning and preparation ... we have done a better job here than ever before."

"But you never know how effective something is until you put it into place and I am hopeful that something happens to the storm, that it's going to dissipate, that it's going to hit in Mexico where no one lives and someone's going to look back and say this was a wonderful training exercise."

Gilbert's intense power not easily explained

MIAMI (AP) — Heat, moisture and wind stoked Hurricane Gilbert to the century's most intense storm. But why it, and not any of the dozens of other foul-weather systems crossing the tropics this summer?

"It's a mystery more or less. We don't know," said University of Miami meteorology professor Rainer Bleck.

"The first part of the summer we were biting our nails, wondering why these (other) disturbances didn't develop," he said Thursday. "That's something meteorologists would like to know more about."

National Hurricane Center forecasters on Sept. 3 noticed a dry low pressure trough moving west slowly out of Africa.

"We get 50 or 60 of these off Africa every summer. About one of six develop," said veteran center forecaster Gil Clark. By Sept. 8, the system was a depression, grew to a trop-

ical storm by Saturday and a hurricane the next day.

"It's a matter of getting everything together in the right place in the right time. It doesn't happen very often. How it develops, we don't know," Clark said.

Tropical waves become depressions when the winds start swirling. When sustained winds reach 39 mph, the system becomes a storm.

The depression gets hurricane status when sustained winds hit 74 mph.

As to why Gilbert organized and strengthened while other systems didn't, Clark said: "That's one thing we're trying to discover. That's in the infancy, our research is on the initiation of the actual organization of a depression."

"That's a mystery," he said.

But the experts do know what fuels a budding storm once early development begins. And they know that development is sparked when winds converge.

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