

U.S.

In Houston, Anxiety and Frantic Rescues as Floodwaters Rise

By JULIE TURKEWITZ, MANNY FERNANDEZ and ALAN BLINDER AUG. 27, 2017

HOUSTON — What felt like an apocalyptic onslaught of pounding rains and rapidly rising floodwaters brought the nation’s fourth-largest city to its knees on Sunday, as highways and residential streets turned to rivers, waist-high waters choked off access to homes and hospitals, and officials begged boat owners to pitch in with an enormous and frantic rescue operation.

It was a scene that evoked Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana in 2005, with worried residents punching holes in roofs in anticipation of the water rising even higher and people being rescued by helicopters from soggy rooftops.

The chaos inflicted by the remains of Hurricane Harvey played out across an enormous swath of Texas, most conspicuously in this metropolitan area of 6.6 million that has long been used to major storms blowing in off the Gulf of Mexico, but that has seldom, if ever, faced a scene quite like this one.

The storm, which made landfall late Friday as a Category 4 hurricane, has so far left five people reported dead, many others injured and untold numbers of homes and businesses flooded, damaged or destroyed on both the coast and far further inland. Even the National Weather Service seemed overwhelmed by the scope of the devastation.

“This event is unprecedented & all impacts are unknown & beyond anything experienced,” the federal service said on Twitter on Sunday. “Follow orders from

officials to ensure safety.”

At a news conference in Houston on Monday morning, Mayor Sylvester Turner said that 5,500 people had been taken in by the city’s shelters and that he expected that number to rise “exponentially,” adding that close to 300 people had been recovered in water rescues since midnight.

Speaking with the city’s police and fire chiefs and other officials, Mr. Turner said that the city’s goal on Monday was to reach all remaining people facing immediate danger, even as he stressed that officials were facing a quickly changing situation that was bound to frustrate residents.

“People who may not have been in a crisis state yesterday may find themselves in a crisis state today,” he said.

The city’s police chief, Art Acevedo, said the city had handled 56,000 calls to 911 since 6 p.m. Friday and had rescued 2,000 people. He said the city was aware of about 185 requests for rescue that had not yet been handled.

“A lot of people are frustrated,” Chief Acevedo said. “Hopefully today we’ll get to the rest of you. Please don’t give up on us. None of us are going to give up.”

In Houston, harrowing close calls shook many families.

Maya Wadler, 17, recalled the moments before she was rescued from her home Sunday around 4 a.m. The water, she said, “bubbled up from the doors, seeped in from the windows.”

“Everywhere you turned,” she said, “there would just be a new flowing puddle. It just kept filling. It passed the outlets. I was so scared. We didn’t know what would happen. And there is no one you can call.”

Ms. Wadler was eventually helped onto a dump truck driven by rescue workers.

“I was sitting in the corner holding my dad really tight,” she said. “I usually just trust my parents that everything is going to be O.K. But I looked up and I saw that my dad was closing his eyes, the water was getting in his eyes. And I just thought: He

has absolutely no idea where we are going to go.”

For a vast swath of southeast Texas, there may be more trouble in the days ahead. The National Weather Service said the storm was expected to linger for a number of days. It predicted an additional 15 to 25 inches of rainfall along the upper Texas coast and southwest Louisiana through Friday. The service also raised the possibility of 50 inches of total rainfall in some areas, exceeding previous Texas records.

Flooding was reported in numerous communities in the Texas interior between Houston, to the east, and Austin and San Antonio, to the west. On Sunday, a mandatory evacuation order was issued for the city of La Grange, where the National Weather Service projected that the Colorado River would crest at 49.1 feet, according to the city’s website.

As inland communities struggled with the flooding crisis, coastal communities that took the brunt of the hurricane’s pounding remained punch-drunk.

In Rockport, where the storm made landfall, hundreds of homes, apartments, businesses, churches and government offices were damaged or destroyed. On Sunday morning, parts of the city were a wreck, pervaded by the sweet stench of gas, wind-battered and littered with downed power lines and tilting utility poles. Injured dogs wandered the streets.

The storm also blew through key areas for the United States oil and gas industry, and it has already caused some disruption to production. Exxon Mobil, for instance, said on its website on Sunday that it was shutting down operations at its huge Baytown refining and petrochemical complex because of flooding, while heavy rain prompted Royal Dutch Shell to close a large refining facility at Deer Park.

Shell, one of the largest producers in the Gulf of Mexico, said it had closed two offshore production platforms, Perdido and Enchilada Salsa, and had evacuated most of the workers.

Still, the gulf produces substantial quantities of oil and gas, and analysts say it is likely that the impact on energy prices and supplies will be limited; substantial

stocks of oil are available, and products like gasoline are on hand because of a long period of booming global output.

In the long term, Texas is likely to face a massive, multibillion-dollar rebuilding effort that may affect a generation — and what is sure to be a daunting and sometimes depressing era of government trailers, red tape and fights with bureaucrats and insurance companies.

The federal government is promising a muscular response, with 5,000 federal employees — including members of the Coast Guard, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Agriculture Department — on site in Texas and Louisiana to assist state and local officials.

“We’re setting up and gearing up for the next couple of years,” Brock Long, administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, said on CNN’s “State of the Union” program on Sunday.

For President Trump, the storm is the first domestic disaster to test his administration’s competence. On Sunday, in a flurry of tweets, the president wrote, “Good news is that we have great talent on the ground.” He announced plans to travel to Texas on Tuesday.

Hanging over this narrative is the suffering caused by Hurricane Katrina 12 years ago. President George W. Bush was blamed by many for the blundering federal response.

Texans, however, responded with great empathy and even heroism. Boat owners crossed the Sabine River to conduct water rescues in New Orleans, and the city of Houston threw open its arms to thousands of evacuees.

Now the Texas government will face rebuilding after a disaster of similar scope, both emotional and geographic: Gov. Greg Abbott said on Sunday that 18 counties were covered by a federal disaster declaration signed by Mr. Trump.

Chief Acevedo was among those who said that the state’s mythic toughness would help Texans soldier on. “It’s sad,” Chief Acevedo said in a live video posted to Twitter. “It breaks your heart for our city and our state. But it’s Texas. We’ll get

through.”

The Houston Independent School District said schools and offices would be closed for the week. The city’s two main airports announced on Sunday that they had ceased all commercial operations. The Federal Aviation Administration estimated that George Bush Intercontinental Airport would reopen at noon on Monday but that William P. Hobby Airport would remain closed until Wednesday morning.

Many of Houston’s streets were rendered impassable, complicating the focus on rescuing residents isolated by floodwaters or trapped in areas where the water was rising. Harris County officials asked the public to contribute boats and high-water vehicles, which they said were “desperately” needed to help rescue people before nightfall.

As hard rains continued to fall, cars lay wrecked or stalled out on Houston’s interstate highways. People walked the roadways, looking for shelter or help, some vainly holding umbrellas skyward. Others waded through waist-high water, or paddled pirogues and little inflatable rafts. Rescue crews traversed the city in high-water vehicles, their crews in life jackets and helmets, and in trucks towing boats and Jet Skis.

At Ben Taub Hospital, a Level 1 trauma center in the sprawling Texas Medical Center complex, officials were waiting for rescue workers to evacuate their 350 patients, starting with roughly 18 patients on ventilator support in critical care units, said Bryan McLeod of the Harris Health System.

Mr. McLeod said that floodwater had entered the basement, and that a sewage pipe had burst. Cafeteria, pharmacy and other operations were suspended. “There’s still about waist-deep water around the facility,” he said.

Elsewhere, ghostly scenes underscored the destruction in a place long seen as one of the nation’s most dynamic generators of growth and prosperity. Near the Galleria, Houston’s famous shopping mall, a stretch of South Rice Avenue had more than two feet of water in some places.

Gloria Maria Quintanilla appeared as a speck on the horizon, wading through

waist-high waters in the middle of the road with a sack thrust over one shoulder and an umbrella perched on the other. Ms. Quintanilla, 60, seemed to epitomize Houston's work ethic, its resolve and its shock.

"I worked at the hotel up there," she said when a reporter approached. As she walked, she explained that she was an immigrant from El Salvador, here since 1982. She makes \$10 an hour washing and ironing sheets and towels at the Doubletree.

She had started the journey from home more than an hour before.

"It was my day to work, and I'm a very responsible person," she said, speaking in Spanish. "I had no idea it was going to be like this."

Julie Turkewitz and Alan Blinder reported from Houston, and Manny Fernandez from Rockport, Tex. Reporting was contributed by Richard Fausset from Atlanta; Stanley Reed, Christopher Mele, Maggie Astor, Christina Caron, Sheri Fink, Jacey Fortin and Matthew Haag from New York; Staci Semrad from San Antonio; David Montgomery from Austin and Michael Hardy from Houston.

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