

LOCAL

Ike kills 4 in Cuba: Is US Gulf Coast next?

By ANITA SNOW
Associated Press Writer

HAVANA (AP) — Cuba's communist government asked them to leave home, and they did: 1.2 million people moved into more secure shelters as Hurricane Ike howled up the spine of the Caribbean's largest island.

Ike killed more than 300 people in Haiti, but was blamed for just four deaths in Cuba, which sets an international standard for orderly evacuations. It is a scenario repeated year after year, hurricane after hurricane, recognized by the United Nations as a model of sophisticated civil defense planning.

Crowds began taking shelter in eastern Cuba as Ike approached. By Monday afternoon, the exodus began in earnest in the capital, where residents emptied out of once-lovely apartment buildings, now decaying and vulnerable to the weather.

"I feel safe here, above all for my granddaughters who are the most important thing in my life," Marta Molas said in a shelter after she and seven other relatives evacuated from a marginal neighborhood. "They take good care of us, we have television and food. Right now we are watching TV to see where Ike is, and when the electricity goes out we have a radio."

Cubans aren't arrested if they don't comply, but are well accustomed to following evacuation orders from the communist government, especially if they fear harm by a natural disaster. Pregnant women and mothers with small children are among the few who could be forced to comply, but that is rarely necessary.

And Cuban Civil Defense makes it easy, bringing buses or trucks to transport people and a few belongings to nearby shelters where they can get a clean bed and showers, free food and medical care. In most cases however, people in safer structures or on higher land welcome family and friends, not seeming to mind sharing close quarters with many others while the storm passes.

Despite the precautions, state television reported Monday that Ike caused four deaths in Cuba: two men killed removing an antenna, a man crushed when a tree fell on his home and knocked down a wall, and a woman who perished when the roof of her house collapsed. The newly reported Cuban fatalities were first of the 2008 hurricane season.

U.S. residents from Florida to Texas were bracing for Ike's next wallop after Cuba. Politicians worried that after some 2 million people fled southern Louisiana ahead of Hurricane Gustav, too few will turn around and flee from Ike.

But as Ike roared toward Cuba's densely populated capital on Monday, Cubans could testify that leaving home was a very smart thing to do.

"This critter was angry, really angry," Delia Oliveras, 64, said in the central city of Camaguey. Winds tore the roof from the living room where her family was huddled, and they fled to a covered patio. "We have seen hurricanes, but never as big as this."

Falling utility poles crushed cars parked along narrow streets in Camaguey, a UNESCO world heritage site. The roaring wind converted buildings of stone and brick into piles of rubble. Colonial columns toppled, and ornate,

centuries-old sculptures crashed to the ground.

"I have never seen anything like it in my life. So much force is terrifying," said Olga Alvarez, 70, huddling in her Camaguey living room with her husband and teenage grandson. "We barely slept last night. It was just 'boom, boom, boom.'"

In the capital, the government closed schools and offices and reinforced windows with wood. Long lines formed at bakeries, and people removed pants from balconies. Nancy Nazal, who lives on the second floor of a high-rise apartment building overlooking the ocean, was told to evacuate and had no problem following orders.

"The truth is, we are scared," she said.

By Monday afternoon, Ike had moved just offshore, giving more fuel to maintain its strength over Cuba, said Felix Garcia, a meteorologist at the National Hurricane Center in

Miami.

By the evening, Ike had sustained winds of near 80 mph and was located just off Cuba's south-central coast, about 35 miles south-southeast of the provincial capital of Cienfuegos. It was dumping rainfall of 6 to 12 inches in some places.

Cuban state television said officials were protecting thousands of tourists at vulnerable seaside hotels, including about 10,000 foreigners at the Varadero resort, east of Havana.

A few street signs toppled at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay in southeast Cuba, and power went out temporarily in some residential areas, Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Robert Lamb said. But no injuries were reported, and the military said hurricane-proof cells protected about 255 men suspected of links to the Taliban and al-Qaida.

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