

## **Residents stream into Ike-hit Galveston**

45,000 islanders fled storm's wrath; hotels, shelters open up to residents

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GALVESTON, Texas - Thousands of people returned on Wednesday for the first time since their island city was blasted by Hurricane Ike nearly two weeks ago, choosing home over warnings that Galveston is "broken" and infested with germs and snakes.

Some returned to find homes in ruins.

Traffic was backed up for 10 miles on the one major highway leading into Galveston, but things appeared to go smoothly once the city of about 57,000 started letting people in about 6 a.m. Many people had been waiting in their cars along Interstate 45 since before dawn.

Police officers were stationed to direct traffic at major intersections where signal lights were ripped away by the hurricane's 110-mile-per-hour wind and 12-foot storm surge on Sept. 13.

Ruben Rosas, 74, one of those who had fled to San Antonio, had joined the line on I-45 at about 3 a.m. Once he reached his first-floor apartment located on a bayou, he found that the walls and nearly all his possessions were gone. He did find a large cross that had been on his father's coffin and a small "King of Dads" statue his kids gave him when they were young.

"This is just sad, but the good thing is, I'm still around," Rosas said. "I can recuperate these things sooner or later."

City officials had prepared residents for such scenes, painting a dreary picture about living conditions on the island since Ike's devastation.

With the dreary picture city officials have painted about living conditions on the island since Ike's devastation, the question might be whether residents want to go home again and stay, once they get there?

"When you come back it's not going to be the same Galveston Island you left," said Galveston Mayor Pro Tem Danny Weber. "It's been damaged. It's been broken."

The mayor and others warned people not to return without tetanus shots and rat bait, and to be ready for swarms of mosquitoes and displaced snakes.

Residents were told to bring their own water and to not even consider turning on the gas or flipping an electrical switch until one of the island's three remaining electrical inspectors can examine the property.

### **'Like a war zone'**

Patricia Davis had to wave away some of those mosquitoes as she surveyed the remains of her apartment, its entrance blocked by collapsed walls, wrecked furniture and sodden clothing.

"I wasn't prepared for this. It's like a war zone," said Davis, 53, a taxi driver.

Diane and Eddie Howard were trying to sell one house on Galveston Island and had just bought another one when Ike struck. The 'For Sale' sign from one house lay amid debris that had been submerged in 8 feet of water; their newly bought house burned down during the storm.

"I've been through all kinds of hurricanes," said Eddie Howard, who was born on the island 77 years ago. "This is the worst one."

There is little drinkable water, limited food, sewer and medical facilities. A curfew is in effect nightly from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.

"We do want to caution folks. There will be some struggles," said Marty Bahamonde, spokesman for the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

### **Safety, health concerns**

Hurricane Ike, a Category 2 storm, battered Galveston with 110 mph winds and a 12-foot storm surge, flooding homes and destroying businesses, more than a week ago. At least 61 deaths, including 26 in Texas were attributed to Ike.

About 45,000 of the city's residents fled Galveston Island, about 50 miles southeast of Houston.

Residents of the island's west end, which was severely damaged by Ike, can visit their homes, but are not being allowed to stay in them.

Galveston still only has limited medical, power, water and sewer system capabilities.

Mark Guidry, the head of the Galveston County Health District, warned incoming residents that health care services on the island are limited.

"There remains significant health and safety concerns on the island," he said.

### **Temporary shelters**

City Manager Steve LeBlanc said more hotels in Galveston are reopening and will be available for residents who return and determine that their homes are uninhabitable.

Gov. Rick Perry toured the Ike-battered areas on Wednesday and announced a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development rental assistance program to help hurricane victims.

City officials are working on a plan to provide temporary shelters on the mainland for people whose homes are not habitable. But LeBlanc stressed the shelters would be available only for a short time.

While electricity and natural gas are being restored in Galveston, LeBlanc said those services in each home will have to be inspected by the city before being allowed to be turned on again.

But Galveston is slowly coming back to life with some stores and restaurants reopening while there are other signs throughout southeast Texas of recovery.

CenterPoint Energy Inc. reported on Tuesday that 73 percent of its 2.26 million customers now had electricity. Entergy Texas reported that 89 percent of its nearly 393,000 customers affected by Hurricane Ike had power again.

On Tuesday, Galveston Mayor Lyda Ann Thomas and other city leaders were in Washington, D.C., to ask lawmakers for nearly \$2.5 billion in emergency funds.

### **'Look and leave' was halted**

The city tried before to allow residents back. It announced Sept. 16 that people could briefly return under a "look and leave" plan, causing evacuees all over the state to pack up and head for the coast. But hours later, it abruptly halted the policy.

Galveston leaders remain optimistic their city would bounce back after Ike.

"This is our island. We are going to rebuild it and we are going to rebuild it bigger and better than it was," Weber said.

**Bush, Clinton team up**

Former presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton planned to join forces again to help out the Ike victims.

The former presidents first teamed up to raise \$11 million for tsunami victims, then worked to raise private money to help victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The two announced their new fundraising drive at a surprise joint appearance at the Clinton Global Initiative in New York on Wednesday.

The new Bush-Clinton hurricane recovery fund won't make grants to individuals or families. Instead, it will coordinate with the hardest-hit cities and towns along the Texas and Louisiana Gulf Coast to finance infrastructure projects.

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