

Ike ready to avoid Key West

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KEY WEST

Residents in the Florida Keys breathed a sigh of relief Monday as a fierce Hurricane Ike turned west on a path away from the low-lying island chain. But Gulf Coast states watched anxiously to see if the storm was gunning for them instead.

Forecasters at the National Hurricane Center warned that, after passing into the Gulf of Mexico sometime tonight, Ike could make landfall in the U.S. over the weekend near the Texas-Louisiana border, possibly not far from Houston.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry predeclared disasters in 88 counties to aid storm preparation and put 7,500 National Guard members on standby.

In Louisiana, where thousands remain without power after Hurricane Gustav hit last week, Gov. Bobby Jindal urged residents to start stockpiling food, water, batteries and other supplies. The state also was readying shelters and making plans for trains, buses and planes in case a coastal evacuation is called later in the week.

“It is still too early to be evacuating certainly, but it is not too early to be making sure you’ve got food and water and batteries. It’s not too early to be checking your car,” Jindal said.

Ike’s movement also has the eyes of the Air Force Northern Command at Tyndall Air Force Base. AFNORTH has had a busy hurricane season and has been responding to damage from Hurricane Gustav and Tropical Storm Hannah and now is bracing for Ike’s landfall.

Emergency forces assigned to AFNORTH already have been distributed at forward staging areas along the southeastern U.S.

“Having our forces prepositioned is the right thing to do,” said Col. David Kriner, 601st Air and Space Operations Center commander at Tyndall Air Force Base in a news release. “When a hurricane approaches, time is against us.”

The 601st AOC monitors air traffic across the continental United States, and is deploying members to serve as part of the Air Component Coordination Element, to “serve in a command and control function to coordinate the movement of needed Air Force assets into stricken regions, support state and federal evacuation, humanitarian relief and search and rescue missions.”

A 12-member ACCE team was deployed to Virginia as part of preparation for Tropical Storm Hanna, and another team was sent to an Army command center in Alexandria, La., for Hurricane Gustav.

“The ACCE is the (Army) command post’s immediate tie in to the capabilities that reside here at Tyndall AFB. They are able to reach back here to the staff where we help meet the requirements real time (to) provide them the best support for national, state and local responders to offer to the citizens affected by these storms,” said Col. John Colombo, director of AFNORTH air, space and information operations.

“What we did here during Gustav has set the stage for Hannah, Ike and the next storms down the line,” he said.

With the storm on a new track, Keys officials let an evacuation order expire Monday. By late afternoon, Ike had weakened to a Category 1 storm, and a hurricane warning for the island chain was discontinued.

Ike still is expected to deliver heavy rain and wind, and authorities suggested residents who had left stay away until Wednesday. They said those who stayed behind should remain inside, and tourists should wait for the weekend to return. Roughly 20,000 tourists left over the weekend when it looked like Ike could make a direct hit.

Many storm-hardened locals just rode out the hype the way they usually do — drinking. Key West residents are a hardy bunch, generations of whom have lived through storms. They typically take a wait-and-see stance.

“Us folks have lived here for years. We worry but we always think it will be OK,” said 80-year-old Barbara Kellner while walking her dog. “And we see the weather report today, and it appears it all will be OK.”

Businesses were not as cavalier. It was the second time in a month vacationers left en masse. Tourists also cleared out of the Keys last month ahead of Tropical Storm Fay, and their departure means a hit to the bottom line. Officials estimate tourists spend about \$175 a day in the Keys. With some 20,000 having fled for Ike, that’s about \$3.5 million for each day they’re gone.

“I think they called the guns out a little too soon. They killed business,” said Deborah Dietrich, the manager of a nearly empty bakery. “Whether we have hurricane ruin or not, there’s financial ruin.”

Dietrich said the Croissants de France bakery would be lucky to tally \$300 in sales for the weekend. They usually bring in more than \$6,000 each day of an average weekend with no storm looming, she said.

Monroe County Mayor Mario Di Gennaro said he didn’t regret telling tourists and residents to get out of town ahead of Ike, though he acknowledged that such orders are costly. He estimated businesses throughout the Keys lost about \$10 million because of evacuations for Tropical Storm Fay last month.

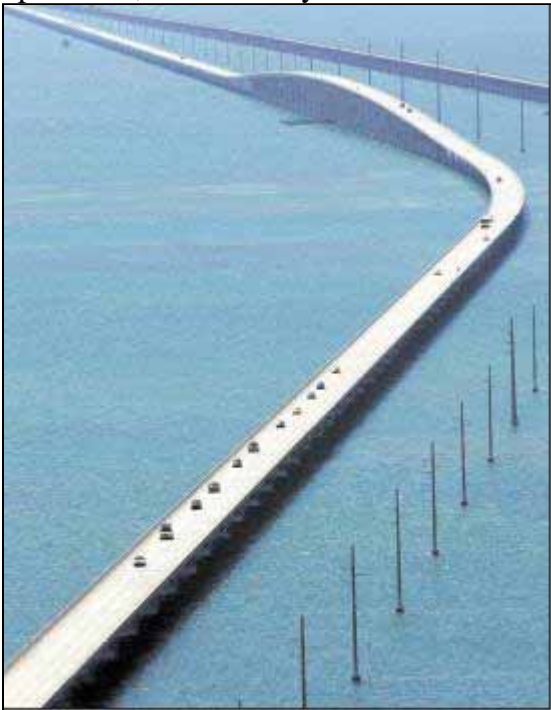
Ike roared ashore in eastern Cuba on Sunday night, blowing homes to rubble and sending waves crashing over apartment buildings.

By Monday afternoon, Ike had maximum sustained winds of about 100 mph. The storm was expected to hit Havana early today.

The storm first slammed into the Turks and Caicos and the southernmost Bahamas islands as a mean Category 4 hurricane that peeled off roofs and knocked down buildings. At least 61 people were killed as it pelted Haiti.

The Federal Emergency Management agency was uncertain about the timing of evacuations along the coast. It would be at least 24 to 48 hours until officials have a clearer picture of Ike’s intended path — and officials need to evacuate communities 48 hours before a storm’s winds kick up.

“That puts us right in middle of when we should be moving people,” Glenn Cannon, FEMA’s head of disaster operations, said Monday.



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Traffic was light on the Seven Mile Bridge from Key West, where a mandatory evacuation was canceled because Ike moved farther south.

Inside

Ike hits Haiti hard, A2



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Plywood on a boarded up hotel reads "Stay Away Ike" in Key West during preparations for Hurricane Ike.