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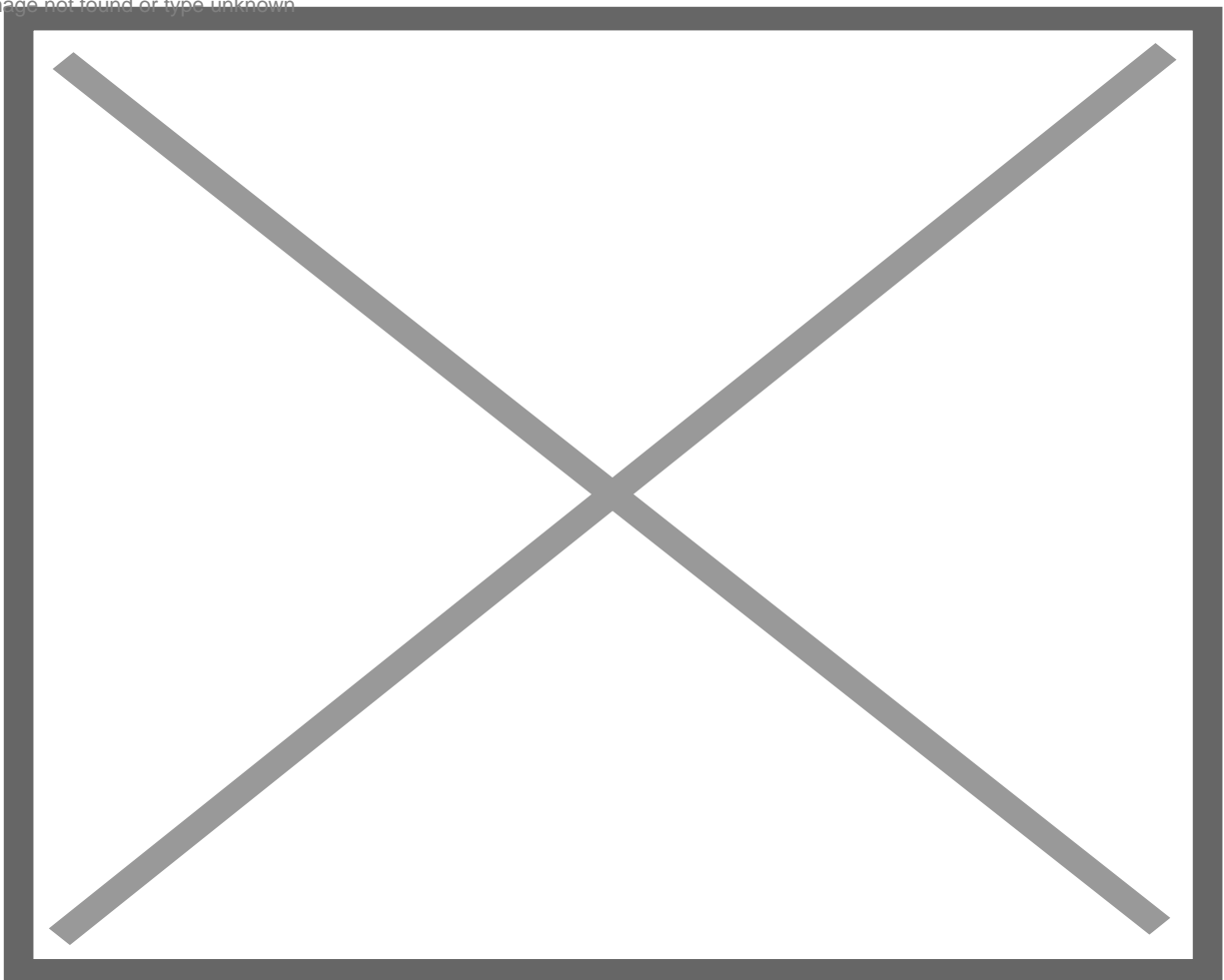
Mass Evacuation Underway in Florida as Hurricane Milton Intensifies

State officials mobilize shelters and resources to manage evacuations ahead of Hurricane Milton's expected landfall; Florida has large Virgin Islands diaspora in Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and Orlando

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Satellite imagery of Hurricane Milton at 5:00 a.m Eastern Time on Oct. 7, 2024.

Hurricane Milton, currently on a collision course with the west coast of Florida, is likely to become a major hurricane later on Monday, forecasters at the National Hurricane Center believe.

Florida is home to a significant population of Virgin Islanders. The state's central and southern regions, especially areas like Miami-Dade, Broward, and Orange counties, which include cities such as Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and Orlando, respectively, have become key hubs for Caribbean

communities due to opportunities in employment, education, and relatively affordable housing, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Research. This connection is particularly relevant when major weather events such as Hurricane Milton threaten Florida, as the impact extends to the large Virgin Islander diaspora living there.

According to NHC's 2:00 a.m. Monday prediction, as Milton "erratically" churns its way eastward through the southern Gulf of Mexico, hurricane watches have been issued for Celestun to Cabo Catoche in Mexico, and tropical storm warnings are in effect for Celestun to Cancun.

Storm surge and hurricane watches should be expected for portions of Florida later on Monday, and forecasters urge those in the Florida Peninsula, the Florida Keys, and northwestern regions of The Bahamas to closely monitor Milton's progress.

Currently, Hurricane Milton is moving east to east-northeast at around 6 miles per hour, but it is expected to start picking up speed on Tuesday. By Wednesday, Milton is expected to approach the Florida peninsula. Maximum sustained winds are almost at 90 miles per hour, with rapid intensification predicted until major hurricane status is reached before the day's end.

Hurricane-force winds have been measured to extend up to 25 miles from the center. Tropical storm strength winds can be felt up to 80 miles from Milton's center.

Forecasters expect that the storm surge associated with the hurricane could raise water levels as much as 4 feet above ground level in areas along the path of the storm. Near the coast, the surge will be accompanied by "large and destructive waves". Hurricane Milton will also cause rainfall of between 5 to 10 inches, or up to 15 inches in localized portions of the Florida Peninsula and the Keys.

Ahead of the hurricane's anticipated arrival, state officials are preparing for what could be the largest mass evacuation since 2017's Hurricane Irma. With the storm's erratic movement, forecast models do vary. However, one likely path would lead Milton to make landfall in the Tampa Bay area, one of Florida's most populous regions. On Sunday, executive director of the Florida Division of Emergency Management Kevin Guthrie said that officials were staging emergency fuel and charging stations along evacuation routes. Plans were also being made to identify and secure possible shelters ahead of the storm's arrival. "We are looking at every potential, possible location that can potentially house someone, as what we refer to in emergency management, as a refuge of last resort," he said.

Wherever Hurricane Milton's actual path eventually takes it, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis says the state will likely be affected. "I don't think there's any scenario where we don't have major impacts at this point," he said, urging residents to use the time until the hurricane's arrival to prepare. "If you're on that west coast of Florida, barrier islands, just assume you'll be asked to leave."

Milton's arrival comes while residents of Tampa Bay are still setting things to rights following the passage of Hurricane Helene, which caused at least 12 deaths in the state. On Sunday, Governor DeSantis expanded the state of emergency to now include 51 counties, in anticipation of the further devastation Hurricane Milton is expected to bring. Florida's state of emergency includes heavily-populated counties such as Broward, Duval, Miami-Dade, Orange, Palm Beach, and Sarasota.