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Category 3 Hurricane Milton Approaches Florida: Tornadoes and Massive Storm Surge Expected Near Tampa Bay

As Hurricane Milton nears landfall, forecasters warn of life-threatening flooding, dangerous storm surge reaching up to 13 feet, and tornado outbreaks across South Florida. Virgin Islanders in key communities are urged to take precautions

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NOAA's NESDIS/STAR GOES-South-East By. NOAA

As of 5 p.m. Wednesday, Hurricane Milton was expected to make landfall near or just south of Tampa Bay later this evening.

Even having weakened to a category 3 hours before its arrival on land, Milton could still hit Florida as a major hurricane, and in any event is expected to hold together sufficiently to remain a hurricane as it moves across central Florida.

Forecasters are concerned about the combination of tides and dangerous storm surge, which they say will cause normally dry areas near the coast to be flooded by rising waters moving inland from the shoreline. Flooding has already started in the most vulnerable coastal areas of Florida, with some minor roads now submerged. Water levels could reach as high as 9-13 feet in some areas, if Milton's arrival coincides with high tide. In the Tampa Bay area, predictions are of up to 9 feet of water.

The deepest water will occur close to and to the south of the landfall location, while rainfall of 6-12 inches are expected across central to north Florida through Thursday. Even in areas unaffected by the storm surge, meteorologists warn that this amount of rainfall could cause catastrophic and life-threatening flash and urban flooding, as well as moderate to major river flooding.

Portions of South Florida have already begun reporting a number of massive tornados spawning ahead of Milton's landfall, caused by the swirling outer bands of the hurricane. More tornados and waterspouts are expected as the dangerous hurricane draws closer. Current watches and warnings are valid until 9 pm Eastern Standard Time, with Miami, Key Largo, Tampa, and Port St. Lucie among the cities covered under the watch.

Parts of I75 remain crowded as many Floridians make last-ditch evacuation efforts, while others, unwilling or unable to relocate temporarily, have decided to ride out the hurricane in their homes. Authorities have warned those who remain that emergency services will likely be unavailable during the passage of Hurricane Milton, and unreliable immediately after the storm's passage.

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.