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Laura Begins Battering of Gulf Coast

Hurricane Season / **Published On August 27, 2020 05:01 AM /**

Staff Consortium **August 27, 2020**

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LAKE ARTHUR, La. (AP) — Hurricane Laura pounded the Gulf Coast for hours with ferocious wind, torrential rains and rising seawater as it roared ashore over southwestern Louisiana near the Texas border early Thursday as a life-threatening Category 4 storm.

Authorities had ordered coastal residents to evacuate, but not everyone did in an area that was devastated by Rita in 2005.

Videos on social media showed Laura's winds battering a tall building in Lake Charles, blowing out windows as glass and debris flew to the ground.

"There are some people still in town and people are calling ... but there ain't no way to get to them," Tony Guillory, president of the Calcasieu Parish Police Jury, said early Thursday morning over the phone as he hunkered down in a Lake Charles government building that was shaking

from the storm.

Guillory said he hopes those stranded can be rescued later Thursday but he fears that blocked roads, downed power lines and flooding could delay that process.

With more than 290,000 homes and businesses without power in the two states, near-constant lightning provided the only light for some.

Officials said search and rescue missions would begin as soon as conditions allowed, along with damage assessments.

The National Hurricane Center said the storm, which intensified rapidly Wednesday before plowing into land with sustained winds of 150 mph (241 kph), came ashore at 1 a.m. CDT near Cameron, a 400-person community about 30 miles (48 kilometers) east of the Texas border.

“Potentially catastrophic impacts will continue,” forecasters said in an ominous warning.

Early Thursday, Laura was centered about 15 miles (24 kilometers) west-northwest of Lake Charles and moving north at 15 mph (24 kph). Its winds had weakened slightly to 130 mph (210 kph) since making landfall.

More than 580,000 coastal residents were under orders to flee in the largest evacuation since the coronavirus pandemic began and many did, filling hotels and sleeping in cars since officials didn’t want to open mass shelters and worsen the spread of COVID-19.

But in Cameron Parish, where Laura came ashore, officials said at least 150 people refused pleas to leave and planned to weather the storm in everything from elevated homes to recreational vehicles. The result could be deadly since forecasters said the parish could be completely covered by ocean water.

“It’s a very sad situation,” said Ashley Buller, assistant director of emergency preparedness. “We did everything we could to encourage them to leave.”

Becky Clements, 56, didn’t take chances; she evacuated from Lake Charles after hearing that it could take a direct hit. With memories of the destruction almost 15 years ago by Hurricane Rita, she and her family found an Airbnb hundreds of miles inland.

“The devastation afterward in our town and that whole corner of the state was just awful,” Clements recalled Wednesday. “Whole communities were washed away, never to exist again.”

Forecasters expected a weakened Laura to move northward through Louisiana and cause widespread flash flooding in states far from the coast. After turning eastward and reaching the Atlantic Ocean, it could again become a tropical storm and threaten the Northeast.

Laura hit the U.S. after killing nearly two dozen people on the island of Hispaniola, including 20 in Haiti and three in the Dominican Republic, where it knocked out power and caused intense flooding.

Laura was the seventh named storm to strike the U.S. this year, setting a new record for U.S. landfalls by the end of August. The old record was six in 1886 and 1916, according to Colorado State University hurricane researcher Phil Klotzbach.

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