

Case study: Hurricane Katrina (2005) [MEDC]



The path of Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina began as a very low pressure weather system, which strengthened to become a tropical storm and eventually a hurricane as it moved west and neared the Florida coast on the evening of 25 August.

Katrina was a category 5 storm, of 175mph and pressure up to 906 mb. The storm surges had reached over 6 metres in height. New Orleans was one of the worst affected areas because it is below sea level and was further protected by levees. These protect it from the Mississippi River and Lake Ponchartrain. The levee defences were unable to cope with the strength of Katrina, and water flooded into the city. After crossing southern Florida - where it left some 100,000 homes without power - it strengthened further before veering inland towards Louisiana, eventually making landfall at Grand Isle, approximately 90km south of New Orleans, at 10am local time on 29 August. At this point, Katrina's sustained wind speed was approximately 200 km/h. The storm passed directly through New Orleans, destroying many lighter buildings and causing extensive damage to others.

Hurricane force winds were recorded along a 200km stretch of coastline, with scenes of similar destruction and flooding in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. Storm surges from the sea caused flooding several kilometres inland in some places. Despite an evacuation order, many of the poorest people remained in the city. People sought refuge in the Superdome stadium. Conditions were unhygienic and there was a shortage of food and water. Looting was commonplace throughout the city. Tension was high and many felt vulnerable and unsafe. 1 million people were made homeless and about 1,200 people drowned in the floods. Oil facilities were damaged and as a result petrol prices rose in the UK and USA.

Responses and Aid

There was much criticism of the authorities for their handling of the disaster. Although many people were evacuated, it was a slow process and the poorest and most vulnerable were left behind. 50 billion dollars in aid was given by the government. The UK government sent food aid during the early stages of the recovery process. The National Guard was mobilised to restore and maintain law and order in what became a hostile and unsafe living environment.