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## Death toll climbs in aftermath of Rita

CREOLE, La. (AP) — While much of Texas and Louisiana dodged the worst of Hurricane Rita, the damage to some small, rural towns was virtually complete — and the storm was being blamed on new deaths long after it moved away.



Darryl Wayne Gonzales walks across a tree that fell through the home of his mother, Bertha Costello, during Hurricane Rita in Liberty, Texas.

By Bahram Mark Sobhani, San Antonio Express-News via AP

As temperatures climbed well into the 90s and the heat index was near 106 degrees Monday, the damage from the storm was evident in small communities in southwest Louisiana and southeast Texas.

"East Texas needs everyone's attention this hour, right now, and it doesn't matter whether it's the state or FEMA or the Corps of Engineers. I don't really care whose fault it is. It needs help now," said U.S. Rep. Kevin Brady. "These communities are the last to complain, but they've reached the end."

The number of deaths rose to nine Monday when the bodies of five people were discovered in a Beaumont apartment. A man, his girlfriend's three children and their aunt apparently were overcome by carbon monoxide from a generator they used to power fans to cool their home. (**Related item:** [Five die using generator](#))

While residents of the Texas refinery towns of Beaumont, Port Arthur and Orange were blocked from returning to their homes because of the danger of

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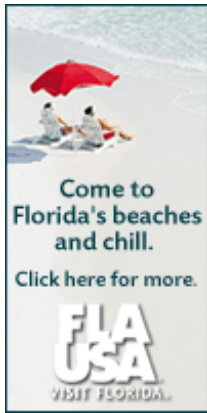


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debris-choked streets and downed power lines, authorities in Louisiana were unable to keep bayou residents from venturing in by boat to see if Rita wrecked their homes. (**Related video:**[Residents returning](#))

Debris was strewn for miles over Cameron Parish, a coastal, sparsely populated town next to the Texas line. Seawater pushed as far as 20 miles inland, drowning acres of rice, sugarcane fields and pasture.

"This is the most damaged area I've seen in the state, the worst," Army Lt. Gen. Russel Honore said of Cameron Parish. "I didn't see anything from Katrina, except in Mississippi, that was as bad."

At a makeshift emergency operations center at a national wildlife refuge, Randy Gary answered a stream of questions from residents trying to find out about their homes or camps. As for his house, he hadn't been able to get to the town of Cameron, but he got an assessment. "There's nothing but a clear lot," he said.

His oyster boats and pontoon boats also had disappeared, a further slap from Rita to his livelihood as a fisherman. The oyster beds he fishes likely are devastated, even if he had the boats to get to them.

But he was still smiling Monday.

"What else we gonna do?" he said, pledging to rebuild his shattered home and work. "It's my life. It's what I do."

An estimated 80% of the buildings in the Louisiana town of Cameron, population 1,900, were leveled. Farther inland, half of Creole, population 1,500, was left in splinters.

In New Orleans, the official reopening of the city was back on track as the mayor welcomed residents back to the Algiers neighborhood, where they found a curfew, limited services and no critical care hospital services.

The Army Corps of Engineers continued pumping water from the Ninth Ward back into the Industrial Canal. It expects to have the water out by the weekend, said Mitch Frazier, an Army Corps spokesman.

President Bush planned to get a personal report Tuesday with a visit to Beaumont and Lake Charles, La., about 55 miles to the east, traveling between the two cities by helicopter and getting an aerial view of the damage from the Saturday storm that socked the region with winds topping 120 mph. (**Related story:**[Bush urges energy conservation](#))

If the power knocked out by the storm and oppressive heat weren't enough, it was the ravenous mosquitoes

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invading their storm-damaged home north of Vidor, Texas, that convinced Harry Smith, his wife and two teenage boys to get out.

With their car disabled by a transmission problem, they hitchhiked more than 10 miles to a staging area for teams from the Federal Emergency Management Agency in hopes of finding shelter. Authorities put them on a bus to San Antonio with a few dozen other storm victims.

"It can't be any worse than here," said Smith, 49, a pipefitter, relieved to be going somewhere to get out of the heat and insects. "This is the worst storm I've seen in the 46 years I've lived here."

For people who didn't evacuate before Rita hit and chose to stay in the primitive conditions, teams from FEMA fanned out Monday over a nine-county area of East Texas to deliver food and water and ice.

Gov. Rick Perry said the state was projecting Rita's total damage at \$8 billion.

The mayors of the Louisiana towns of Sulphur and Vinton pleaded with residents to stay away until the sewage systems could be repaired, power could be turned on and hospitals and emergency services could be restored.

"Right now, there's very little to come back to," said Sulphur Mayor Ron LeLeux, of his town where every major power transmission line was destroyed, uprooted trees split houses in two and splintered trees left most streets impassable.

Vinton Mayor David Riggins begged people over the radio not to return home yet because it was straining the food and water supplies he needed for fire, police and emergency crews.

Authorities said at least 16 Texas oil refineries remained shut because of Rita. A refinery in Port Arthur and one in Beaumont were without power, and a second Port Arthur refinery was damaged and could remain out of service for two to four weeks.

Quanishia Haynes, whose father died in the Beaumont apartment, said he and his girlfriend's family evacuated to Mississippi as Rita approached. She said they returned about 1 a.m. Monday because they ran out of money.

She and her boyfriend later found everyone in the apartment unresponsive. She said it looked like her father, Billy Coleman, 46, tried to get out of bed and was walking to the door when he fell.

Three siblings — Crystal Farva, 12, Demarcus Bean, 10, Alliyah Reese, 7 — were killed, along with Coleman and Dianna Bean, 29. The children's mother and Bean's sister, Irene Bean, survived along with her 8-year-old son Emery Reese, 8. Both were hospitalized in critical condition.

A neighbor said initially the generator was running outside the apartment, but he said he overheard Coleman and Bean debating over whether to move it indoors so the noise wouldn't bother other neighbors or get stolen. An apartment manager said the generator was found in a closet.

Associated Press reporters Melinda Deslatte in Creole, La., April Castro in Beaumont, Betsy Blaney, Dave Koenig and Anabelle Garay in Dallas, Kelley Shannon and Liz Austin in Austin, Suzanne Gamboa in Washington D.C., and Juan Lozano, Pam Easton and Kristen Hays in Houston contributed to this report.

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