CHANTAL BASHES LA. COASTAL AREAS

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CONSTANCE BEACH — The eastern edge of Hurricane Chantal bashed this beachfront community early Tuesday morning, demolishing several buildings, along with a road.

The impact of the damaging storm surge also eroded several portions of La. 82 between Holly Beach and Constance Beach in Cameron Parish. Large chunks of pavement were washed from the highway and pounding seas scored the roadway on the leeward side of the road.

La. 82 was passable between Holly Beach and Constance Beach, although authorities were discouraging travel.

The storm literally destroyed the entire road along the shore in Constance Beach. Pavement was ripped up and tossed like flakes of paint onto the remaining land. Several houses and camps were shredded to pieces.

The 8,500 people evacuated Monday afternoon from lower Cameron Parish were allowed to return home around noon Tuesday. Hayes Picou, Cameron Parish civil defense director, said winds peaked at 45 knots in Holly Beach, located about eight miles east of Holly Beach, at approximately 7:30 a.m.

Picou said Cameron Parish residents cooperated and headed northward after the evacuation order was given.

"They were gone within two hours of when we said to evacuate," Picou said.

Some roads in the Oak Grove area remained under water Tuesday afternoon, he said.

The city of Cameron had no apparent damage, although streets had been flooded and some scattered debris could be seen on the roadways.

By midafternoon, the sun broke through the clouds. A steady wind of 25 knots blew from the south, continuing to whip large waves in the cocoa-colored Gulf water.

In Holly Beach, five miles west of Cameron, the damage was mostly cosmetic, although some camps and a store were flooded. Beach sand was washed up from the shore, and the community was littered with items that were washed away from camps.

One already-dilapidated camp in Holly Beach appeared to have been knocked from its pilings, and pieces of the structure were scattered among the other camps.

But it was Constance Beach that was hit the hardest.

Allen Broussard, who lives on the beachfront at Constance, said he couldn't remember a hurricane that caused more damage. He wasn't in the parish when Hurricane Audrey hit in 1957.

"This is the worst, and I've been here 23 years," he said.

A half-inch of water and mud covered the floors of three of the apartments that he has for rent.

"It's a mess, and it's sickening to look at," he said.

Surging waves damaged the downstairs storage area of his residence, ripping out a back wall.

The damage was much worse to the east of Broussard's property. Several camps were ripped apart by the storm. It was difficult to tell just how many were damaged. Scraps of wood, roofing and household items blocked the roads, which were covered with a thick film of mud and sand.

Broussard, originally from Gueydan, was combing the neighborhood in an effort to find his wheelbarrow, which he found in the midst of a pile behind his house.

"I'm going to need it bad," he said.

Broussard contended that man-made structures could have prevented erosion of the beach and destruction of the road.

"With breakwaters, this wouldn't have happened," Broussard said. "It's too late now for us on the beachfront."

Bob Scott of Holly Beach said that damage to La. 82 could have been prevented if breakwaters had been constructed along the highway. He noted that the land was intact where a few structures had been located a few yards from the beach.

Long before the all-clear was given, evacuees housed at a Lake Charles school were anxious to return home.

Nancy Cowan, Red Cross disaster chairwoman in Lake Charles, said 185 people from Cameron Parish were staying at Pearl Waterson Elementary School.

"They kept coming in through the night," Cowan said. "Most of them I've seen before."

Conventions in Lake Charles had most of the motels in Lake Charles and Sulphur booked up.

Many of the evacuees were weary of the waiting, and they were becoming irritable at being photographed, interviewed and videotaped by reporters.

"I don't want to be bothered. My nerves are bad," said an elderly woman. "I ain't slept a wink," said a man who refused to give his name.

The same man, who was white, and several of his friends complained that blacks and whites were sheltered in the same facility.

Alfred Daigle of Cameron said he was glad to leave home and he wasn't ready to return.

"If I stayed I'd have to work," said Daigle, who is a security guard. "If I got back early enough they'll make me work."

His car was crammed with a wide assortment of belongings, including an electric motor, and his pet Chihuahua.

"She stays like that," Daigle said, pointing at his car. "I got everything packed."

More than 100 boats of various kinds were docked at the Port of Lake Charles.

Shrimpers Oliver Burroughs of Cameron had his boat "Moonlighter" moored at the port, and he expected he would start the 84-hour trip back home Tuesday night or Wednesday.

Burroughs said his boat was sitting idle in Cameron when the evacuation order came, and he decided to head north.

"If it floods, you can't take care of your boat," Burroughs said. "If a boat gets above the pilings it could knock a hole in it. Best thing is to get away from there."

Meanwhile, back in Cameron, Picou was relieved that the storm turned out no worse than it had, but he was beginning to show some signs of fatigue from working through the night.

"What's today?" he asked, when questioned about his last moments of sleep.

Picou had driven Sunday from Colorado Springs, Colo., and began preparations with his volunteer staff Monday for the year's first hurricane.