

## Ike May Still Hit New Orleans

RESIDENTS in the Florida Keys breathed a sigh of relief Monday as a fierce Hurricane Ike turned west on a path away from the low-lying island chain. But Gulf Coast states watched anxiously to see if the storm was gunning for them instead.

Forecasters at the National Hurricane Center warned that, after passing into the Gulf of Mexico sometime Tuesday night, Ike could make landfall in the U.S. over the weekend near the Texas-Louisiana border, possibly not far from Houston.

In Louisiana, where thousands remain without power after Hurricane Gustav hit last week, Gov. Bobby Jindal urged residents to start stockpiling food, water, batteries and other supplies. The state also was readying shelters and making plans for trains, buses and planes in case a coastal evacuation is called later in the week.

"It is still too early to be evacuating certainly, but it is not too early to be making sure you've got food and water and batteries. It's not too early to be checking your car," the governor said.

With the storm on a new track, Keys officials let an evacuation order expire Monday. Ike is still supposed to deliver heavy rain and wind, and authorities suggested residents who had left stay away until Wednesday. They said those who stayed behind should remain inside, and tourists should wait for the weekend to return. Roughly 20,000 tourists left over the weekend when it looked like Ike could make a direct hit.

Many storm-hardened locals just rode out the hype the way they usually do - drinking. Key West residents are a hardy bunch, generations of whom have lived through storms. They typically take a wait-and-see stance.

In hard-backed chairs lined up on the sidewalk, 72-year-old Jerry Walker sat with old friends, drinking beer wrapped in paper bags and watching the winds blow.

"I'm not ever going to leave here until they carry me out in a pine box," Walker said with a broad grin. "I was born and raised here. Weather don't scare me."

Businesses were not as cavalier. It was the second time in a month vacationers left en masse. Tourists also cleared out of the Keys last month ahead of Tropical Storm Fay, and their departure means a hit to the bottom line. Officials estimate tourists spend about \$175 a day in the Keys. With some 20,000 having fled for Ike, that's about \$3.5 million for each day they're gone.

"I think they called the guns out a little too soon. They killed business," said Deborah Dietrich, the manager of a nearly empty bakery. "Whether we have hurricane ruin or not, there's financial ruin."

Dietrich said the Croissants de France bakery would be lucky to tally \$300 in sales for the weekend. They usually bring in more than \$6,000 each day of an average weekend with no storm looming, she said.

Monroe County Mayor Mario Di Gennaro said he didn't regret telling tourists and residents to get out of town ahead of Ike, though he acknowledged that such orders are costly. He estimated businesses throughout the Keys lost about \$10 million because of evacuations for Tropical Storm Fay last month.

Ike roared ashore in eastern Cuba Sunday night, blowing homes to rubble and sending waves crashing over apartment buildings. By Monday afternoon, Ike had maximum sustained winds of about 100 mph (160 kph). The storm was expected to hit Havana early Tuesday.

The storm first slammed into the Turks and Caicos and the southernmost Bahamas islands as a mean Category 4 hurricane that peeled off roofs and knocked down buildings. At least 61 people were killed as it pelted Haiti.

By early afternoon Monday, a Category 2 Ike had moved just offshore of Cuba, where the storm was maintaining its strength over warm water, said Felix Garcia, a meteorologist at the National Hurricane Center.

"It can definitely maintain its strength right now, and when it's out of Cuba it has the potential to become a lot stronger," Garcia said.

With the current forecast models, Jindal said he doesn't anticipate the sort of mass evacuations forced by Gustav, which emptied out most of south Louisiana, including the New Orleans area. Instead, coastal communities vulnerable to tidal surges and larger areas of southwest Louisiana would likely be asked to seek refuge away from their homes.

"Roughly speaking, they think there's about a one in three chance that the storm will make landfall in Louisiana," Jindal said of his conversations with forecasters. "We're just getting ready for the worst-case scenario."