

After Harvey, misery piles on for Texas plant evacuees

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Gary Lobell, a 57-year-old veteran, had to evacuate his camper van a mile from the flooded Arkema plant in Crosby, Texas

First their neighborhood was deluged by Harvey's torrential rains. Then, officers turned up at the door with more bad news: there is a risk of a chemical blast at a nearby plant and it's time to evacuate.

Two days on, some among the area's poorer residents are still living in an

[emergency shelter](#) set up in the center of Crosby, around five miles (eight kilometers) from the Arkema plant where a chemical fire broke out early Thursday.

More fires are expected to follow, and while officials say the plume of smoke spewing from the site northeast of Houston does not appear dangerous for now, they have warned people to exercise extreme caution.

"They just came up and beat on my door," recounted Gary Lobell, a 57-year-old veteran who lives in a camper van a mile from the plant, inside the evacuation zone.

"They didn't let me bring my cats. I didn't have time to get anything, just the clothes on my back."

Wiry and bearded, Lobell was among several dozen residents taken under the wing of the First Baptist church in Crosby, and housed in a shelter that was first opened for victims of Hurricane Harvey.

Lobell left his four cats inside an old school bus near his van, with food to last three days. That was almost three days ago.

"I feel stressed, worrying about everything," he said. "I'm worried about my animals and my belongings, all my military records are in my trailer," he told AFP outside the red-brick building that normally serves as a community center.

"Most of the people we have are ready to go home, because 90 percent of them, their homes are still there," explained Josh Seale, a member of the church.

"But they can't get into their homes because the roads are blocked."

'It's not safe'

Cordoned off by firefighters and police, the area around the flooded plant is a mix of comfortable residential neighborhoods, much humbler dwellings, and open fields. It is a sparsely populated area, slightly out of the way.

Everyone around here knows the Arkema plant, and Josh Seale—for one—harbors no hard feelings towards its owners.



Lane Averett and his wife Loyce left their three cats, dog and a calf behind when they were told to evacuate their trailer near the Arkema plant

"It's a one in 500 years event, I don't blame the plant for not knowing that."

In the main streets of Crosby, and the nearby shopping district, life was crawling back to normal six days after Harvey smashed into the Texas coast as a Category Four hurricane, turning roads into rivers across Houston and surrounding areas.

But for people living near the plant the crisis was far from over.

Lane Averett, 59, and his wife Loyce had to leave their three cats, dog and a calf behind—with food only for a day two—when they were told to evacuate their trailer.

They expected to be home soon, but now the authorities are speaking of keeping them out for up to seven days.

"That calf will be dead by then. A cow can't go after 72 hours without water," fretted the Crosby resident of 25 years, in camouflage shirt and slacks, as his wife shook her head in silence.

Bank employee Marta Higdon found refuge at the church shelter with her three children, and her elderly parents. They escaped from the floodwaters earlier this week with no more than the clothes on their back

"We left everything. These clothes are from the shelter," she said. "I don't have my vehicle, I don't have nothing except my purse."

"We're feeling so sad, especially the kids."

But the time she and her family got out, the water on the road was already above her knees.

"Some people wanted to stay but they're here now, because I think they're scared."

Higdon doesn't know what state she will find her house in—and may not find out for a while—but after the overnight blast she views the prospect of going home with dread.

"We're waiting for the release, for when we can get back home," she said. "But at the same time we're scared."

"We don't feel like living there no more. What happens in the future, if this happens again and we're sleeping? It's not safe at all, for me it's not safe."

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