

In hurricane-hit Mexico Beach, a marathon clean-up begins

October 13 2018, by Cyril Julien



Some areas of Mexico Beach are simply a giant wasteland of debris

In devastated Mexico Beach, where Hurricane Michael unleashed its most violent rains and winds, residents are taking stock of the damage, reuniting with their loved ones—and bracing for what will be a long,

difficult clean-up operation.

Some came Friday with vans or moving trucks, hoping to recover as many personal effects from their splintered homes as they could. Others came with nothing—as there is nothing left to save.

Charles Smith, 57, has run the beachfront Gulf View Motel for 34 years. Now, it stands in ruins.

The facade was destroyed, the windows shattered. Three beach houses on stilts plowed into the building.

"I couldn't open the back door because of water. Wind came in, knocked the windows off—the refrigerator is now stuck in the bathroom," Smith told AFP, surveying the horrendous mess.

But the hotelier said he is determined to get back on his feet.

"Maybe FEMA will help me out—I would appreciate that," he said, referring to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"I'm going to get my business back, get an architect, go to city planning—maybe I get my motel back within two years. It's going to take three to six months just to get electric in here," he predicted.

"It's going to be a fight."

Bridge out

Emergency crews have set up a temporary cell phone tower to help residents cut off by Michael's fury.



Mexico Beach, a town of just 1,200 people, has been devastated by Hurricane Michael, which made landfall Wednesday as a Category 4 storm

Firefighters, rescuers, personnel from Florida and other states, and FEMA have set up a task force headquarters in the seaside community and have split up responsibility for the area into different search zones.

From first light on Friday, excavators and dump trucks cleared roads to allow traffic, specifically aid convoys, to get through.

But a bridge was washed out between the city and Port St. Joe to the southeast, making it impossible to get there via coastal roads.

Florida Governor Rick Scott visited Mexico Beach on Friday for the

first time since Michael made landfall on Wednesday as a Category 4 hurricane with winds of 155 miles per hour (250 kilometers per hour).

"The city has been devastated—it's like a bomb went off. It's like a war zone," Scott told AFP. "Lots of stuff is unstable, so I want everyone to be cautious."

While food and water distribution is well underway, "we continue to have needs, and I expect the federal government to do their job," he added.



Houses were destroyed and some people in Mexico Beach returned to find they had nothing left

'Take what you need'

Further down the beach from the Gulf View Motel, a local supermarket is beyond repair, its doors smashed in. Locals are helping themselves to snacks, cigarettes and even bottles of booze.

One young woman, who asked not to be identified, said the owners told residents to help themselves.

"'Take what you need but only what you need,' they said," the woman told AFP, a bottle of liquor in her hand. "This is all we need right now."

Bob Tenbrunson, a retiree, fled his home in Mexico Beach before Michael hit, taking shelter in nearby Panama City with his wife at their daughter's home.

After seeing the damage, he set about fixing what he could.

Tenbrunson, his hands dirty from clearing away debris, said he had spent his life savings and his retirement pension on his home here.



Beachfront properties suffered the worst damage in Mexico Beach

"I can't sell it now so I just have to be hopeful that (the city) will be rebuilt and fixed," he told AFP. "I just can't imagine how it is going to look. Several of our nice restaurants in town are no longer there."

Tenbrunson admitted he was not meant to be in town—emergency personnel have asked residents to stay away to allow the sniffer dogs to hunt through the debris for victims.

"This is really a beach town—no high-rise buildings. It makes me sad," he admitted with a sigh.

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