

Powerful Hurricane Idalia pummels Florida, churns on to Georgia

August 31 2023, by Gerard MARTINEZ



Residents use kayaks to travel on a flooded road in Tampa, Florida, on August 30, 2023, after Hurricane Idalia made landfall.

Idalia roared across Florida Wednesday as a dangerous and powerful hurricane, bringing potentially catastrophic storm surge to coastal

communities and knocking out power to thousands as the storm swept through the southeastern United States.

As it barreled into neighboring Georgia, Idalia weakened to a tropical storm that nevertheless was drenching the region with up to 10 inches (25 centimeters) of rain and bringing life-threatening inundations from rising water moving inland, officials said.

They described Idalia and its potentially deadly high-surfing waters as a once-in-a-lifetime event for the area of northwest Florida most affected.

While there were no immediately confirmed deaths, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis stressed "that very well may change," given the storm's magnitude.

State officials said first responders including search and rescue teams were operational, but warned it could take time to reach more remote areas blocked by fallen trees or high water.

Idalia struck as an "extremely dangerous" Category 3 hurricane in Florida's marshy, sparsely populated Big Bend area around 7:45 am (1145 GMT), the US National Hurricane Center (NHC) reported.

The storm crashed ashore packing maximum sustained winds of approximately 125 miles (215 kilometers) per hour near the community of Keaton Beach, with a possible storm surge of up to 16 feet (about five meters) in some coastal areas, the NHC said.



A flooded street is seen near the Steinhatchee marina in Florida on August 30, 2023.

Though Idalia weakened to a Category 1 hurricane and eventually a tropical storm with winds of 70 miles per hour as it moved over Georgia, authorities warned residents of the aftermath, and the dangers of high tide.

The NHC said water levels were more than six feet above normal in Cedar Key, a string of Florida islands jutting into the Gulf of Mexico, and warned coastal waters were rising rapidly.

Mass evacuations were ordered for thousands of Floridians, although

many defied authorities and hunkered down.

In Perry, a small town in Idalia's path, emergency crews were already cleaning up and residents who stayed behind were assessing the impact.

John Kallschmidt, 76, struggled to push aside a pine tree that fell on the roof of his small wooden house.

"It got pretty scary with all the trees blowing over and coming down," he told AFP. "But it's the way it is, it's life in Florida. You have to get accustomed to this kind of thing."

In coastal Steinhatchee, about 20 miles south of Idalia's landfall, streets were mostly deserted, while the flooded main road appeared as an extension of the town's river.

Patrick Boland, 73, who was out surveying damage, said, "It was a little windy, the trees were coming down in my front yard, but other than that, the house is fine."



A first responder clears debris off the street in Perry, Florida after Hurricane Idalia slammed into the coast as a powerful Category 3 storm on August 30, 2023.

Speedy storm

In the Tampa Bay area—a metropolitan zone of some three million people—streets were submerged and flood waters swept across yards.

Just north in the city of Tarpon Springs, residents waded, or even canoed, to safety as homes and apartments were inundated.

DeSantis told reporters that Idalia moved faster than some of the more disastrous hurricanes that have hit the state in which the eye of the storm

idled along the coastline and caused death and severe destruction.

Some 250,000 customers in Florida and 230,000 in Georgia were without electricity as of 6:00 pm, according to tracking website PowerOutage.us.

Power was also out for about 14,000 customers in South Carolina, where hurricane warnings remained in effect Wednesday evening and the NHC has forecasted flooding.

Some Floridians though suggested they had dodged a bullet with Idalia's projected ferocity diminished.



Residents wade through flood waters after having to leave their home on August

30, 2023 in Tarpon Springs, Florida.

"We were really spared and blessed," Sheriff Robert McCallum of Levy County, just south of the landfall zone, told a briefing, saying the storm surge was "not near what we had expected."

But President Joe Biden warned the threat was not over.

"The impacts of the storm are being felt throughout the southeast," he said at the White House. "We have to remain vigilant."

The Federal Emergency Management Agency deployed more than 1,000 emergency personnel to the disaster zone.

"Idalia is the strongest storm... to make landfall in this part of Florida in over 100 years," FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell said.

Airport reopens

Tampa International Airport, which closed as Idalia approached, announced it reopened as of 4:00 pm for arriving flights, and that full service was set to resume early Thursday.



A flooded street is seen near the Steinhatchee marina in Florida on August 30, 2023.

The storm dealt a glancing blow to Cuba before moving over the Gulf of Mexico, which scientists say is experiencing a "marine heat wave"—energizing Idalia's winds as it raced towards Florida.

Record-breaking temperatures off Florida are expected to amplify Atlantic storms this season, with scientists blaming human-caused climate change for the overall warming trend.

Hotter sea surfaces impart more energy on the air above them, packing more punch into storm winds.

"These storms are intensifying so fast that our local emergency management officials have less time to warn and evacuate and get people to safety," Criswell told the Wednesday press conference.

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