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Hurricane Gustav

## Could have been worse

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### New Orleans dodges another natural disaster



Reuters She was told not to stay

BY THE time Nathan Reese realised that New Orleans was really being evacuated, his neighbours in St Bernard parish had already cleared out. He scraped up enough money to buy an old car, which he filled with his girlfriend, their newborn son, a cat, three kittens, and whatever clothing they could grab. It was a miserable trip. Traffic crawled. The car had no air-conditioning and it overheated. At one point Mr Reese had to sneak into a hotel outside Houston to get some ice to put on the baby. On September 2nd, the day after Hurricane Gustav made landfall, the family were sitting in a patch of shade outside an emergency shelter in Austin, unsure of their next move. "All I know is we lost everything and we're trying to get gas so we can get up out of here," said Mr Reese.

When Gustav formed in the Caribbean late last month, much of the Gulf coast girded for disaster. Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and part of Texas were put under hurricane watch. The National Guard was activated.

Emergency shelters were set up all over the South. But the biggest worry was for New Orleans. Forecasters said that Gustav was heading directly for it and would probably arrive as a Category 3 hurricane. The city is still struggling to recover from Hurricane Katrina, which hit Louisiana as a Category 3 storm three years ago and led to at least 1,600 deaths. Officials were frantic to avoid another such catastrophe. They were also keen, especially at federal level, to show that they had learnt from the last time.

Ray Nagin, the mayor, warned that Gustav would be “the mother of all storms” and ordered a mandatory evacuation. He said that anyone who stayed behind would be on his own, and had better have an axe on hand to chop his way from the attic to the roof. The city emptied out. Many people spent hours waiting for buses that would take them to shelter, without even knowing exactly where they were heading. Within a few days, about 2m people left Louisiana.

As it turned out, Gustav could have been worse. It weakened after battering the Caribbean islands (where it caused about 100 deaths). When it made landfall, 70 miles outside New Orleans, it was a Category 2 storm. Water sloshed over some levees, but they held. Eight people were reported dead, not including several who were already ill, and there was significant property damage. But these losses were small compared with Katrina.

Most agreed that evacuation had been wise all the same, though residents were becoming upset as the days went on. Swathes of Louisiana were without power, and shops were shuttered. New Orleans wanted its residents to stay away for a while; many who tried to return on September 3rd were blocked. When Mr Reese mentioned that he might return, a friend visiting him at the shelter in Austin chided him. “Why put yourself through all this stupid mess?” said Valerie Weathers. “You don’t want to keep running and running. You want to build a foundation.”

Gustav could have been worse. But for the Gulf coast's most vulnerable residents, near-disaster is near enough.