

HURRICANE KATE PUMMELS CUBA

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KEY WEST

Hurricane Kate pounded Cuba with 100 mph winds Tuesday, forcing the evacuations of more than 1000,000 people, and spawned squalls that knocked down power lines in Key West where residents huddled in shuttered homes and busy bars.

The storm hit Cuba's capital city of Havana at 1:30 p.m., two hours earlier than expected, knocking out telephones, electricity and gas.

About 138,000 people were evacuated throughout the island, Cuba's official news agency reported.

Kate also whipped Key West with 105 mph gusts and later moved into the Gulf of Mexico where the open water's effect on the hurricane was unpredictable, National Hurricane Center forecasters said.

"Kate could still be with us several days," forecaster Mark Zimmer said.

"It's important for people on the Gulf Coast not to let their guard down," he said, explaining that warm Gulf waters could strengthen Kate.

"People are thinking about things like Thanksgiving and it's hard to make them think about a hurricane. But this can still be a danger."

The storm knocked down dozens of power lines, snapped tree limbs and palm fronds and submerged roadways in the Keys, but no injuries were reported, officials said. Reports from Havana were spotty, but damage there was apparently more substantial.

The Cuban news media reported that Kate's force was felt from the northern tip, 90 miles from Key West, to Cienfuegos on the south coast and that President Fidel Castro ordered all civil-defense personnel on alert for "Possible widespread damage."

Nine-foot waves crashed into the waterfront of Havana, a city of 2 million people, said Cuban journalist Jorge Gonzalez Villa.

At 11:00PM, the hurricane was centered near latitude 24.2 north, longitude 83.2 west, or over the open waters of the extreme southeast Gulf of Mexico approximately 150 miles west-southwest of Key West. It was moving west-north-west at a rate of 15 to 20 mph, and was expected to turn gradually northwest.

Highest sustained winds were 100 mph and gales extended 300 miles to the north of the center and up to 100 miles to the south, the advisory said.

Off Louisiana, struck by a record three hurricanes this year, oil companies caught off guard by Hurricane Juan sent many of the 20,000 offshore oil workers inland by helicopter Tuesday.

The storm caused flooding on the southwest part of Key West and knocked down power lines, causing scattered outages in the city, said Peter Webber, assistant to the Monroe County administrator.

High winds also toppled a 300-foot radio tower in Sugarloaf Key, Webber said.

Hurricane warnings were in effect for the lower and middle sections of the Keys, and a state of emergency declared Monday for Florida's six southernmost counties was called off by Gov. Bob Graham.

A Soviet freighter rescued five people from a disabled sail boat shortly before it was destroyed in 25-foot waves churned up by Kate, the Coast Guard said Tuesday.

The 150-foot Soviet cargo ship Captain Stulov intercepted a distress signal from the 39-foot sloop Maihai and picked up the crew floating Monday afternoon 15 miles southeast of Cape Florida at the southern tip of Key Biscayne, coast Guard Seaman Edmund Pope said.