

Published on Friday, October 3, 2008 by CommonDreams.org

Ike: The Silent Storm

by Teresa Van Deusen

The evacuees from Hurricane Gustav had just returned home September 5th when Hurricane Ike began to head for the Gulf of Mexico. National news covered the track of Ike through the Gulf non-stop in the five days leading up to landfall. More than a million Texans sought shelter away from the coast and countless more piled in with family and friends. The storm came aground on around 1:00 AM on Saturday, September 14th with a category 5 surge of saltwater and category 2 winds of 115 mph.

In the dark of the night 45, 000 homes were destroyed and millions of residents lost electricity, water, and roofs. Then Ike turned north, leaving hundreds of thousands more Americans without power in a 200 mile wide swath from the Gulf Coast to the Great Lakes.

And then there was silence. No hum of air conditioners. No stereos blasting or people singing off key. No loudspeaker from the football games on Friday night. Just an eerie quiet as people emerged from their hiding places to survey the damage.

The Media was not allowed to film people being rescued from rooftops in Texas. They were prohibited from flying over the small towns and beaches isolated by flooding and decimated by the hurricane. Local press raged about the conditions, then fell silent in a game of play-nice hoping to be allowed at least limited access. Not once did the national press report this suspension of the first amendment. The sound of black hawk helicopters could be heard for miles.

With cable TV down, and electricity at a premium, the primary source of information was local radio. Listeners tuned in hoping for updates and relevant information which seemed to come irregularly between endless chatter. If you had an antennae and power you might have been able to tune into the local news. For seven days after the storm only local news was broadcast. Not a whisper of Caylee, or OJ, or Palin, nor the economic crises was heard for an entire week. Most relied on neighbors and friends for information in shared conversations over piles of debris.

Phone service was completely unreliable and is still spotty in most areas. Sometimes a call would randomly go through only to be randomly dropped. For a while only text messages got through. My mother finally tackled the texting learning curve from her closet as the storm raged outside. It's hard to express how you are really feeling in a simple text message while water pours into your bedroom. Nobody can hear you groan.

One day after the storm it rained, re-flooding homes and washing out roads. People started to clean up the debris and looters targeted homes instead of businesses. Some people went shopping and ice skating in the Houston Galleria, a surreal bubble of air conditioned normalcy. Local power trucks went out to assess the damage. 2000 people were rescued off Boliver by the Coast Guard. Stories began to roll in of residents who had tried to evacuate but found the ferry closed and the roads blocked by water. Evacuees in remote shelters began to check out, determined to get information on their home towns. The sound of cars driving around trees in the road began to weave its way back into the landscape.

24 hours after landfall, Ike began to disappear from the national news. 48 hours after landfall CNN and the Weather Channel evacuated Galveston Island and the airwaves fell silent.

Most people thought they would be back to work on that first Monday, but they were largely wrong. Millions of

addresses did not have power. Elevators did not work. Trees blocked roads. A mere 100 traffic lights were working. A million people had no running water. Broken glass littered the streets of downtown. No local shelters had been opened, 14 regional hospitals were closed, and FEMA had not yet begun to distribute ice or water. Press conferences were relegated to sound bytes and Ike disappeared completely the front page of the most papers. Thousands who had ridden out the storm were bussed off Galveston Island. Evacuees who had left before the storm began being bussed back "closer to home and work". Employers booked hotel rooms for employees to keep their businesses running. Stillness fell over 3 million customers still in the dark. The hum of generators, a distinct growling, failed to drown out the buzz of mosquitoes.

On Tuesday, after President Bush had concluded his tour of the area, an army of repair trucks was finally deployed and PODs were set up. Rice University resumed classes and students bagged free ice for the neighbors. City, state and federal teams tried to stay calm with one other, a strained exercise at best. Local news continued to be purely local. And inversely, not many locals had power or a TV signal, so they hardly noticed. Information increased as a premium, Where can I buy gas? Are the banks open? Where can I charge my nebulizer? Sleep with my c-pap machine? Find safe drinking water? Buy a tarp? Or a generator? Price gouging ran amok. Half a million people finally had running water after 3 days, but the sound of flushing toilets and running showers seemed oddly loud by candlelight.

By the first Wednesday after the storm plans were announced, then changed, and changed again. 3.5 million people sought ice and water and gas and more food as they lived without power. FEMA announced hotel vouchers available online or via phone, the two services least reliable for days to come. Elderly Houston residents, living in high rise independent living facilities, were discovered left to their own devices without a/c or elevators. The shuffling of their determined feet in the dark stairwells could be hard as they climbed to check on their friends.

One week after Ike struck less than 50% of electricity had been restored. 250,000 people lived without water, most had missed a paycheck, and temperatures were rising. The bars hopped on Friday night. People clustered on brightly lit restaurant patios sharing a hot meal and telling tales. Entrepreneurs ran generators and beacons to patrons who went home to inky black bedrooms and non-perishable pop top snacks. Normalcy resumed to some degree for those who could get it. For many it did not. Suspended somewhere between shelters and flooded homes, people still went back to work if they could. Jaws were clenched, but the recovery moved forward. Pride kept words from being said out loud.

The second Monday brought the long run home. Less than 1000 traffic lights were in working order. Rush hour resumed and a seven mile drive took four hours. There was a sort of togetherness among the people. It was important to be polite. There was surprisingly little honking. Miles of drivers hunkered down in their air conditioned cars talking on cell phones and reassuring themselves that this was a sign of normalcy.

Two weeks after this disaster 1.5 million people still go home to no power but that which they provide for themselves. The blue light of televisions run by generators blares out into the darkness. The sound of the newscasters voices are more frequently replaced by a game or movie. Cable is restored with news that never mentions Hurricane Ike. The remote shelters have all closed. All evacuees have been bussed back to their city of origin, found the rare hotel room, or bunked wherever they could. People in Galveston sleep in tents. FEMA ceased distributing ice and water days ago. Only two regional hospitals are reopened. Warnings about mold, vermin, mosquitoes, and "germs" are issued with reminders that medical care is not readily available. Restoration of power schedules are pushed back for lack of parts. Debris will not be removed until after Thanksgiving, or New Year's if we are lucky. 245, 000 Texans applied for emergency food stamps. Food banks are distributing four times their normal amount in an attempt to meet demand. More than 250,000 households have applied for FEMA assistance. There are no empty hotel rooms for 300 miles. The scurrying of bugs and rustling rodents amid the debris keeps people up at night.

I like to think that if America knew of the suffering in the south that help might be forthcoming. That maybe Galveston residents would not be sleeping in tents and fire stations might have the gas they need to go out on calls. I imagine that children would not be forced to sleep in cars because they can't find a FEMA hotel room. I would like to believe that the nation would protest the thought of waiting to bring in FEMA trailers until next week or the policy of bussing people "closer to home and work" when those places don't even exist anymore.

But the rest of the nation doesn't know all these things because more reporters are covering OJ and Caylee than the millions of Americans disrupted by Ike.

It's been three weeks and it will certainly be many more before this is over. The Texas Guard is rolling out. Clean up crews and tow trucks rattle down the streets. Chainsaws replace generators. But still, the silence is deafening. Seriously deafening. As if no one is paying any attention at all.

Teresa Van Deusen is a freelance writer living in Austin, TX. She has been volunteering her skills to disaster relief efforts since 1998. For the past three weeks she has been working on Hurricane Ike recovery travelling from Austin to Houston delivering much needed supplies.

Article printed from www.CommonDreams.org

URL to article: <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2008/10/03-3>

