

The Associated Press State & Local Wire

July 8, 2005, Friday, BC cycle

Thousands flee Florida Keys as Hurricane Dennis heads toward U.S.

BYLINE: By CORALIE CARLSON, Associated Press Writer

SECTION: Domestic News; State and Regional

LENGTH: 559 words

DATELINE: KEY WEST, Fla.

As Sue Theroux waited for a Greyhound bus, she lamented over the plans thrown into disarray as a powerful Hurricane Dennis barreled toward the Gulf of Mexico.

"This is my wedding night, and I'll be on a bus," she said.

The Point Pleasant, N.J., resident had planned to get married on Saturday. Instead, she and her groom, Tom Theroux, hastily held the ceremony on Thursday after tourists throughout the Florida Keys were ordered to evacuate.

Forecasters warned residents from Florida to Louisiana to be ready this weekend for Dennis, with top winds already at 135 mph. The Category 4 storm was projected to hit the Gulf Coast by Sunday and the National Hurricane Center warned Dennis had become "an extremely dangerous" storm.

Gov. Jeb Bush declared a state of emergency. In addition to tourists, evacuation orders were given Thursday for all mobile home residents and those living in the southernmost part of the island chain.

As thousands fled, lines of cars were seen streaming out of the Keys. Airlines reported that nearly all flights out of Key West were full and Greyhound added buses to help get residents out of the area.

Those who stayed prepared to ride out the storm.

"There's so much stuff to do," said Mark "New" Hackmer, 24, as he put plywood over the windows at MamaJoe's Cycles & Stuff Inc. in Marathon, the midpoint of the Florida Keys. "We get this done early, and the hurricane party starts at 9."

At 8 a.m. EDT, Dennis' eye was about 230 miles southeast of Havana, or roughly 285 miles south-southeast of Key West. It had slowed slightly and was moving northwest at about 12 mph.

Forecasters said the storm could drop 4 to 8 inches of rain Friday over the extreme end of southern Florida. A storm surge of 3 to 6 feet was possible in the lower Keys.

A hurricane warning was issued for the lower Keys. A hurricane watch was in effect for the middle and upper Keys.

At Cape Canaveral, the space shuttle Discovery was considered to be safe on its launching pad for now, and NASA still aimed for a liftoff next week - the first shuttle mission since the Columbia disaster.

But shuttle managers decided Thursday evening to begin initial preparations to move Discovery from the pad. A final call on whether to haul the shuttle back to its hangar was expected Friday afternoon.

Four hurricanes battered Florida last year, causing more than \$40 billion in damage.

In Alabama, Clay Ingram, spokesman for AAA Alabama, said Thursday that many people were making hotel reservations inland as a precaution.

Thousands flee Florida Keys as Hurricane Dennis heads toward U.S. The Associated Press State & Local Wire July 8, 2005, Friday, BC cycle

"Some people say, 'I don't care, just get me out of here, find me something,'" Ingram said.

Many in Dennis' projected path already got a wake-up call this week from a surprising Tropical Storm Cindy that caused three deaths, knocked out power to thousands, and spawned twisters that toppled trees and caused up to \$40 million damage to a famed NASCAR track, the Atlanta Motor Speedway.

In Louisiana, which was still mopping up after Cindy, officials said they would have a better idea by Friday morning whether evacuations would be needed.

Meanwhile, the remnants of Cindy were centered southwest of Washington on Friday morning, and flood and flash flood watches were posted from the Carolinas into New England.

On the Net:

National Hurricane Center: <http://www.nhc.noaa.gov>

LOAD-DATE: July 9, 2005

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: AP Photos FLWL105

Copyright 2005 Associated Press
All Rights Reserved