

Hurricane Michael slams into Florida, Southeast

By JAY REEVES AND
BRENDAN FARRINGTON
Associated Press

PANAMA CITY, Fla. — Hurricane Michael slammed into the Florida Panhandle with terrifying winds of 155 mph Wednesday, splintering homes and submerging neighborhoods before continuing its destructive charge inland across the Southeast. It was the most powerful hurricane to hit the continental U.S. in nearly 50 years and at least one death was reported during its passage.

Supercharged by abnormally warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico, the Category 4 storm crashed ashore in the early afternoon near Mexico Beach, a tourist town about midway along the Panhandle, a 200-mile stretch of white-sand beach resorts, fishing towns and military bases. After it ravaged the Panhandle, Michael barreled into south Georgia as a Category 3 hurricane — the most powerful ever recorded for that part of the neighboring state. It later weakened to a Category 1 hurricane, and there were reports it spawned possible tornadoes in central Georgia.

In north Florida, Michael battered the shoreline with sideways rain, powerful gusts and crashing waves, swamping streets and docks, flattening trees, shredding awnings and peeling away shingles. It set off transformer explosions and knocked out power to more than 388,000 homes and businesses.



Douglas R. Clifford/Tampa Bay Times via AP

The Oceanis is grounded by a tidal surge at the Port St. Joe Marina on Wednesday in Port St. Joe, Fla. Supercharged by abnormally warm waters in the Gulf of Mexico, Hurricane Michael slammed into the Florida Panhandle with terrifying winds of 155 mph on Wednesday, splintering homes and submerging neighborhoods.

A Panhandle man was killed by a tree that toppled on a home, Gadsden County Sheriff’s Office spokeswoman Anglie Hightower said. But she added emergency crews trying to reach the home were hampered by downed trees and debris blocking roadways. The man wasn’t immediately identified.

Damage in Panama City was extensive, with broken and uprooted trees and power lines down nearly everywhere. Roofs were peeled off and homes split open by fallen trees. Twisted street signs lay on the ground. Residents emerged in the early evening to assess damage when rains stopped, though skies were

still overcast and windy.

Vance Beu, 29, was staying with his mother at her apartment, Spring Gate Apartments, a small complex of single-story wood frame apartment buildings. A pine tree punched a hole in their roof and he said the roar of the storm sounded like a jet engine as the winds accelerated. Their ears even popped as the barometric pressure dropped.

“It was terrifying, honestly. There was a lot of noise. We thought the windows were going to break at any time. We had the inside windows kind of barricaded in with mattresses,” Beu said.

Kaylee O’Brien was crying as she sorted through the

remains of the apartment she shared with three roommates at Whispering Pines apartments, where the smell of broken pine trees was thick in the air. Four pine trees had crashed through the roof of her apartment, nearly hitting two people. Her 1-year-old Siamese cat, Molly, was missing.

“We haven’t seen her since the tree hit the den. She’s my baby,” O’Brien said, her face wet with tears.

In Apalachicola, Sally Crown rode out the storm in her house. The worst damage — she thought — was in her yard. Multiple trees were down. But after the storm passed, she drove to check on the cafe she manages and saw

breathhtaking destruction.

“It’s absolutely horrendous. Catastrophic,” Crown said. “There’s flooding. Boats on the highway. A house on the highway. Houses that have been there forever are just shattered.”

Gov. Rick Scott announced soon after the powerful eye had swept inland that “aggressive” search and rescue efforts would get underway as conditions allowed. He urged people to stay off debris-littered roads.

“If you and your family made it through the storm safely, the worst thing you could do now is act foolishly,” he said.

Michael was a meteorological brute that sprang quickly from a weekend tropical depression, going from a Category 2 on Tuesday to a Category 4 by the time it came ashore. It was the most powerful hurricane on record to hit the Panhandle.

More than 375,000 people up and down the Gulf Coast were urged to evacuate as Michael closed in. But the fast-moving, fast-strengthening storm didn’t give people much time to prepare, and emergency authorities lamented that many ignored the warnings and seemed to think they could ride it out.

Diane Farris, 57, and her son walked to a high school-turned-shelter near their Panama City home, where about 1,100 people crammed into a space meant for about half as many. Neither she nor her son had any way to communicate

because their lone cellphone got wet and quit working.

“I’m worried about my daughter and grandbaby. I don’t know where they are. You know, that’s hard,” she said, choking back tears.

In Panama City, plywood and metal flew off the front of a Holiday Inn Express. Part of the awning fell and shattered the glass front door of the hotel, and the rest of the awning wound up on vehicles parked below it.

“Oh my God, what are we seeing?” said evacuee Rachel Franklin, her mouth hanging open. The hotel swimming pool had whitecaps.

Hurricane-force winds extended up to 45 miles from Michael’s center at the height of the storm. Forecasters said rainfall could reach up to a foot in spots. And then there was the life-threatening storm surge.

A water-level station in Apalachicola, close to where Michael came ashore, reported a surge of nearly 8 feet.

Based on its internal barometric pressure, Michael was the third most powerful hurricane to hit the U.S. mainland, behind the unnamed Labor Day storm of 1935 and Camille in 1969.

Based on wind speed, it was the fourth-strongest, behind the Labor Day storm (184 mph), Camille and Andrew in 1992.

Forecasters said it would unleash damaging wind and rain all the way into the Carolinas, which are still recovering from Hurricane Florence’s epic flooding.

Limousine service operator charged in crash that killed 20 people

By MICHAEL HILL AND
JENNIFER PELTZ
Associated Press

COBLESKILL, N.Y. — A limousine service operator was charged Wednesday with criminally negligent homicide in a crash that killed 20 people, while police continued investigating what caused the wreck and whether anyone else will face charges.

Nauman Hussain, 28, showed little emotion as he was arraigned Wednesday evening in an Albany-area court, and he ignored shouted questions from reporters as he left after posting \$150,000 bond. A judge had entered a not guilty plea for him.

Earlier, his lawyer said that Hussain wasn’t guilty and that police were rushing to judgment in investigating Saturday’s stretch limo wreck.

But State Police Superintendent George Beach said

Hussain hired a driver who shouldn’t have been behind the wheel of such a car, and the vehicle shouldn’t have been driven after state inspectors deemed it “unserviceable” last month.

“The sole responsibility for that motor vehicle being on the road on Saturday rests with Nauman Hussain,” Beach said, though he noted that investigators continue looking into whether anyone else should be held accountable in the crash.

Hussain’s car was packed with luggage when he was stopped Wednesday on a highway near Albany, Schoharie County District Attorney Susan Mallery said.

Hussain’s lawyer, Lee Kindlon, said his client felt unsafe at home because he’d



Hussain

gotten threats.

The company, Prestige Limousine, has come under intense scrutiny since a 19-seater limo ran a stop sign and plowed into a parked SUV at the bottom of a long hill Saturday. The

impact killed two pedestrians and 18 people in the limo, which was taking a group to a birthday bash.

Kindlon said his client handled only marketing duties and phone calls, while his father ran the company, though police called Hussain its operator.

“My client is not guilty,” Kindlon said. “The police jumped the gun in charging him with any crime.”

Under New York law, criminally negligent homicide involves not perceiving a substantial, unjustifiable risk that

leads to someone’s death. It’s punishable by up to four years in prison.

Charged with a single count involving all 20 victims, Hussain spoke in a clear, firm voice as he gave brief answers to the judge’s questions about his finances and living

arrangements. He turned twice to nod at relatives in the courtroom audience.

Hussain has had a brush with authorities before. State police accused him and his brother of claiming each other’s names after a 2014 traffic stop, which happened while

the brother was driving without a valid license.

Their father, Prestige Limousine owner Shahed Hussain, also has a history with law enforcement — as a government informant in terror plot investigations after the Sept. 11 attacks.

William F. Bell, M.D.

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