



A US Navy ship and three barges are seen on the Industrial Canal after they broke their moorings and drifted into a railroad bridge as Hurricane Gustav struck the Gulf Coast on Monday in New Orleans. Hurricane Gustav weakened to a category one storm after it crashed ashore in Louisiana west of New Orleans, the National Hurricane Centre said.

## Worst believed over for storm-hit New Orleans

Over 100 killed in Caribbean, US

AFP, New Orleans

New Orleans shrugged off a pounding blow by Hurricane Gustav, with relieved officials saying the city appeared to have avoided a repeat of the catastrophe of three years ago when Katrina struck with deadly effect.

"It's been a hell of a day," St. Bernard Parish chief sheriff's deputy Jimmy Pohlmann told AFP as National Guard soldiers reinforced a nearby overflowing levee with sand bags at sundown Monday.

"I think the worst has passed," he said. "But it always seems when you think you have everything under control something bad happens."

Gustav pounded the US Gulf coast Monday with ferocious rain and wind, but the partially rebuilt levees in New Orleans appeared to be holding almost three years to the day since Katrina swamped the fabled jazz city.

An estimated 10,000 residents remained in the city after nearly two million people fled coastal

areas over the weekend -- an exodus authorities described as the biggest evacuation in US history.

At least seven deaths were blamed on Gustav, Louisiana officials told US media, bringing the storm toll to more than 100 dead after the storm battered the Caribbean for days.

Four victims on Monday died in accidents during evacuations and three critically ill hospital patients died while they were transferred from local medical centres, local officials said.

The toll for the Caribbean was at 96, with most of the victims killed in Haiti.

Fallen tree branches and downed power lines crisscrossed streets in New Orleans's Upper Ninth Ward -- ground zero of the 2005 disaster. The wind ripped siding, gutters and roof tiles from houses in the mostly deserted city.

A convoy of National Guard soldiers rode through flood water in the poor neighbourhood, determined to ferret out residents defi-

antly seeking to outlast the hurricane, and to prevent a repeat of the post-Katrina anarchy.

The storm slammed ashore Monday morning as a Category Two hurricane packing winds of 110 miles (175 kilometres) per hour but Gustav weakened overland and by Monday evening it had been downgraded to a tropical storm, the National Hurricane Centre said.

By 1:00 am (0600 GMT), the storm carried winds of 45 miles (75 kilometres) per hour with the centre of the storm about 50 kilometres southwest of Alexandria, Louisiana. It was headed for eastern Texas later Tuesday, forecasters said.

"Gustav continues to weaken over Louisiana while dropping heavy rains," the centre said. More than 400 of those who chose not to evacuate were hunkered down in St. Bernard Parish at its border with Plaquemines parish as soldiers, police, residents and prisoners beefed up the earthen wall with sand bags.

## EU freezes Moscow talks

Georgians hold giant anti-Russia rally

AFP, Brussels

The European Union on Monday froze talks with Moscow on closer ties until Russian troops withdraw from Georgia, as hundreds of thousands staged an anti-Russian rally in the Georgian capital.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy said he would visit both Moscow and Tbilisi next Monday for talks on the Caucasus crisis, accompanied by European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana.

"As long as the withdrawal of troops has not been respected, all meetings on the (EU-Russia) partnership accord are postponed," Barroso told journalists after the extraordinary summit, the first since the Iraq war in 2003.

"It is clear that in the light of recent events, we cannot continue as if nothing has happened," Barroso added.

Sarkozy said the crisis "means that we have to re-examine our relationship with Russia."

The French president will meet

his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev on September 8 in Moscow, Russian news agencies reported Tuesday, citing an aide to Medvedev, Sergei Prikhodko, saying Moscow intended to follow up on previous contacts with Sarkozy.

"The meeting on September 8 is going to be crucial for relations between the EU and Russia," Sarkozy said.

The EU's decision at the emergency summit came as Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili hailed a turnout of "one million" protesters who poured into the streets to demonstrate against Russia's military action.

But it coincided with the rebel leader of the separatist region at the root of the crisis saying that he plans for South Ossetia to become a part of Russia and to host Russian military bases.

"We aim for this," Eduard Kokoity told journalists Monday when asked if the enclave intended to join Russia.

In a joint summit statement, the European leaders said relations

with Russia "have reached a crossroads." They urged Moscow "not to isolate itself from Europe."

Condemning Russia's "disproportionate reaction" in Georgia, they argued that a military solution to the crisis was not acceptable.

The EU voiced support for Georgia, promised help with reconstruction and agreed to send a "fact-finding mission" immediately -- with the possibility later of "an increased European Union commitment on the ground."

The EU leaders also committed to organising an international donors conference to drum up aid for Georgia's reconstruction.

EU-Russia relations are currently governed by a partnership accord that dates from the post-communist era of 1997.

After many delays, negotiations on a fresh framework for diplomatic, economic and military relations were finally launched in July, and the next round of the talks had been scheduled for September 15.

"We've had to wait 18 months for the EU to get itself ready," said

Russia's ambassador to the European Union, Vladimir Chizhov. "We don't need these talks or this new agreement any more than the EU does."

In Tbilisi, huge posters depicting images of dead and injured from last month's fighting against Russia hung from buildings along the protest route.

"Georgia is united as never before, there are one million people on the streets," Saakashvili told a crowd on Freedom Square as simultaneous protests took place in several other towns and in European capitals.

"Georgia will never stop resisting. Georgia will never surrender!" he added.

The EU opted against sanctions against Russia, and Moscow's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had said it was Georgia and not Russia that should be subjected to an arms embargo.

Solana had said the EU hoped to launch an observer mission to Georgia within weeks, and that an "exploratory mission" of around 40 people now was on the ground.



## Aso eyes Japanese PM's job

AFP, Tokyo

Outspoken conservative Taro Aso signalled his desire yesterday to be Japan's next prime minister after the abrupt resignation of Yasuo Fukuda deepened political turmoil in the world's second economy.

Fukuda made his shock announcement on Monday after less than one year in office, saying he was overwhelmed with the mounting problems besetting Japan, which is teetering on the brink of recession.

The new political uncertainty led to a late selloff on the Stock Exchange, whose benchmark index slumped 1.75 percent to its lowest level in five months.

Fukuda remains in office until his governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) meets to elect his replacement as leader. That is expected to be on September 22, after which parliament would formally endorse the new premier.

## UN aid plane crashes in Congo

AP, Geneva

The United Nations says a plane carrying 17 people on a humanitarian aid flight has crashed in Congo.

The company that operated the plane said Tuesday on its Website that an aerial survey by helicopter indicates there are no known survivors.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs says the Beechcraft plane went missing in bad weather late Monday with two crew and 15 passengers on board.

It was located 9.4 miles northwest of the airstrip at Bukavu in eastern Congo, its intended destination.

UN spokeswoman Elizabeth Byrs says rescuers are trying to reach the site.

The plane was operated under contract to US-based company Air Serv International.

## HIT-AND-RUN KILLINGS

## High-profile Indian found guilty

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian court Tuesday found a businessman guilty of killing six people by running them over in his car after a trial featuring prominent families, crooked lawyers and alleged witness intimidation.

Sanjeev Nanda, 30, was convicted of homicide for drunkenly steering his BMW into the six men as he returned home with friends from a late-night party in New Delhi in 1999.

Three of the victims were homeless people sleeping on the pavement, while the other three were policemen manning a checkpoint.

Nanda, the grandson of India's former navy chief and the son of an arms dealer, sped away from the incident to go to a friend's house, where blood stains and flesh were removed from the car.

## US monitors 2 new tropical storms

AFP, Miami

US officials were keeping a close eye Tuesday on two tropical storms already posing a potential threat after deadly Hurricane Gustav battered the US Gulf Coast.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said Monday preparations were already under way as Hanna hit the Turks and Caicos Islands, with a forecast that it would head toward the southeastern US coast.

Hanna lost some wind strength and was downgraded to a tropical storm Tuesday with driving rains that could spark deadly flooding in Haiti and eastern Cuba, the National Hurricane Center warned.

With Hanna packing sustained winds of 70 miles (110 kilometers) per hour, "heavy rainfall was affecting the southeastern Bahamas, Turks and Caicos islands and Haiti," the NHC said at 1200 GMT.

It said Hanna could dump up to 20 inches (50 centimetres) in the southeastern Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos islands, and up to

12 inches (30 centimetres) in the central Bahamas.

"Rainfall amounts of two to four inches with maximum amounts of up to eight inches (20 centimetres) are expected over the mountainous terrain of eastern Cuba and northern portions of Hispaniola where these rains could cause life-threatening mudslides and flash flooding," the NHC warned.

"Hanna could regain hurricane strength later" Tuesday or Wednesday, the NHC added.

Tropical Storm Ike, meanwhile, formed further east, and a tropical depression -- the 10th of the 2008 hurricane season -- has emerged in the far east Atlantic as of early Tuesday, according to the National Hurricane Center.

"It's a little early to tell where Ike is going to go, but we clearly have to be getting ready for Hanna and we're working with the states in the potential target area to make sure they're getting ready to do what they have to do," Chertoff told CNN.

Ike was whirling about 1,235 miles (1985 km) east of the Leeward islands, the NHC said.

## Israel, Syria to resume indirect peace talks

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel and Syria will soon resume indirect peace talks with Turkish mediation, Israeli public radio reported on Monday.

An Israeli official would neither confirm nor deny the report, saying only that more talks were "very possible."

Israeli and Syrian envoys have held talks in Turkey -- without meeting face-to-face -- on four occasions since May, when the talks were relaunched after an eight-year freeze. They last round was at the end of July.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan will meanwhile travel to Damascus on Thursday to attend four-way talks hosted by Syria on Middle East peace, a government spokesman said in Ankara.

The September 4 meeting will bring Erdogan together with Syrian

President Bashar al-Assad, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Qatar's emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani.

France currently holds the presidency of the European Union, while Syria heads the Council of the Arab League and Qatar is the current chair of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

The main issue dividing the two long-time enemies remains the strategic Golan Heights, seized by Israel from Syria in the 1967 Six Day War and annexed in 1981 in a move not recognised by the international community.

Syria has demanded the return of the entire territory running down to the banks of the Sea of Galilee, Israel's main source of freshwater.

Israeli officials have remained tight-lipped about the Golan but said they are willing to make major concessions for peace.

## Iraq-US pact to go to parliament in 10 days

AFP, Baghdad

A draft security deal between Washington and Baghdad on the future of US forces in Iraq is to be submitted to parliament within 10 days, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki was quoted as saying yesterday.

"The SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement) will be sent to parliament within 10 days," he said in the Badr newspaper, run by the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council, a key Shiite political party which is closely allied to Maliki.

"The government is waiting for an answer from the United States on the Iraqi suggestion to keep the sovereignty of Iraq and the interests of its people. The members of parliament will accept or reject the agreement," Maliki said.

But chief of the Badr Brigade party, Hadi al-Ameri, said he was unaware of any deal.

"There is no final draft until now," Hadi al-Ameri told AFP.

The paper also quoted parliament speaker Mahmud Mashhadani as saying the two sides differed on seven issues, although he did not reveal them. "These issues need to be amended for a positive result that benefits

the country," he said.

On Monday, a copy of the agreement was published by Al-Iraq newspaper which said the issue of immunity for American troops was the main sticking point in the 27-point deal.

US President George W. Bush and Maliki agreed last November to sign the SOFA in Iraq by the end of July, but it has been delayed.

The proposed pact will decide the future presence of American forces in Iraq after the December 31 expiry of the UN mandate, which currently acts as the legal basis for their presence in the country.

American troops are expected to withdraw from Iraqi cities in June 2009, but the draft gives no final date for the complete withdrawal of US troops, which Iraqi negotiators have told AFP will be by the end of 2011.

Iyad Samarraie, leader of key Sunni party the National Concord Front, told AFP that immunity was indeed the most contentious issue.

"The Iraqis want that Iraqi laws should be applicable to the Americans in Iraq but the Americans are not agreeing to it. The two sides need to reach an agreement on this," Samarraie said.

## Republicans rocked as Palin says teen daughter pregnant

AFP, St Paul

Republican vice presidential pick Sarah Palin revealed Monday her unmarried teenage daughter is pregnant, in the latest bombshell to rock the party's Hurricane Gustav-curtailed convention.

Palin said her daughter Bristol, 17, would have the baby and marry its father, as the convention held a shortened first day, shorn of political rhetoric out of respect for those sheltering from Gustav's wrath.

The curtailed convention will cost presumptive nominee John McCain some of his precious opportunity to take his unfiltered case to US voters, a week after his Democratic rival Barack Obama's spectacular jamboree in Denver.

A new CBS/New York Times poll on Monday suggested that McCain needed a boost, putting Obama and his vice presidential pick Joseph

Biden up 48 percent to 40 percent, ahead of the November 4 election.

McCain's surprise choice of Palin as his running mate last week electrified the Republican Party's social conservative base, in particular evangelical Christians who had been reluctant to back McCain.

And early signs suggested that powerbase was still intact for Palin, a 44-year-old abortion foe, despite the revelations about her daughter.

"Our beautiful daughter Bristol came to us with news that as parents we knew would make her grow up faster than we had ever planned," she said in a statement with her husband Todd.

"We're proud of Bristol's decision to have her baby and even prouder to become grandparents. As Bristol faces the responsibilities of adulthood, she knows she has our unconditional love and support," they said.



Anti-government protesters take part in a demonstration inside the Government House in Bangkok yesterday. Thailand's prime minister declared a state of emergency in the capital after thousands of his opponents and supporters clashed in the worst street violence here in more than a decade.

## NEWS ANALYSIS

## EU displays unity on Russia but not strength

AFP, Brussels

EU leaders managed to overcome their differences over Russia at an emergency summit on Georgia but are still in a relatively weak position in handling Moscow, analysts said Tuesday.

The main result of the extraordinary European Union summit Monday was the freezing of talks with Russia on a new strategic partnership pact as long as Russian troops remain in the heart of Georgian territory.

The summit was hailed in Brussels as a triumph of European unity, overcoming differences of opinion which pitted the likes of Britain and Poland -- more hardline in their stance to Moscow -- against France, Germany and Italy -- less inclined to jeopardise ties with a resurgent and energy-rich Russia.

The EU summiters also agreed that French President Nicolas Sarkozy, the main player in Europe's diplomacy efforts, would travel to Moscow and Tbilisi on Monday for talks.

However Tanguy Struy, senior

researcher at the Belgium-based Centre for Studies on Conflicts and Crises, saw the moves as displaying Russian strength more than European unity.

The freezing of talks and the Sarkozy visit "don't put Russia under pressure, on the contrary it shows that the Russians are back. It's us who are going to try to talk with the Russians, it's us who are asking for things and the Russians are delighted," he told AFP.

"The (Europeans) hid their divisions yesterday. The talks suspension was a minimum compromise, not an enormously courageous diplomatic move."

In any case the existing trade and cooperation pact with Russia, which was drawn up in 1997, will trundle on in the absence of a successor.

Natalia Keshchenko, a Russia expert at Global Insight, echoed that Moscow will see the glass as at least half full as the 27 EU nations stopped short of imposing any real sanctions.

"For Russia ... this is celebrated

as, if not a full victory then at least a diplomatic success for them because they managed to convince their European partners that trade sanctions would not be beneficial to either side," she said.

Russia took military action last month after Georgian troops entered the breakaway region of South Ossetia.

Despite signing a French-brokered peace plan, Russian troops have since failed to withdraw to their former positions and Moscow has recognised both South Ossetia and its fellow Georgian breakaway Abkhazia.

The EU leaders, in their summit statement, decried Russia's action as "unacceptable" and said their relations "have reached a crossroads."

Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski of Poland, one of Russia's staunchest critics within the EU, went further, trumpeting that Europe was on "the cusp of history" and that if there was to be some kind of Second Cold War "we will win it. As Europe we are 10 times richer in resources, and sources of power, than Russia."

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