

# In the eye of the storm

Hurricane Katrina was the worst natural disaster in American history. Thousands of people lost their lives when the country was hit by the deadliest storm surge ever recorded. And as Katrina's swirling mass hurtled across blackened skies, towns and cities all but disappeared under the downpour of wind, rain and floodwater.

Entire neighbourhoods collapsed in minutes as the waters gushed through the streets. Trees were uprooted. Bridges and railway lines were washed away. Cars were picked up like toys and hurled against buildings, lamp posts or each other. Power lines were destroyed, telephones were cut off and drinking water quickly became polluted.

It was during the last days of August that Hurricane Katrina swept violently up the Gulf of Mexico from the Bahamas. As it approached the USA at more than 160mph, it measured Category 5 – the highest level on the hurricane scale. Crashing into the coastline, it tore through the southern states of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, unleashing millions of gallons of floodwater with catastrophic consequences.

The city of New Orleans, standing in the eye of the storm, suffered the greatest devastation. It lies almost entirely below sea level, surrounded by protective barriers called levees. Usually these manage to hold back the swirling storm surges that regularly power their way towards the city during the hurricane season. But, this time, the storm was too ferocious, bulldozing its way through the levees, crushing and crumbling them in its wake.

More than a million people had been persuaded to evacuate the city before the hurricane struck. Many thousands more could not, or would not, leave their homes and were left behind, trapped by the rising floodwaters. As they awaited rescue, some clung desperately to roof tops, trying to attract the attention of rescuers. Some made makeshift boats or rafts from anything they could lay their hands on, and tried to row to higher ground. Others just waded through the floodwaters, searching for a safe place to ride out the storm.

As the waters finally started to subside, and the clear-up began, a new weather warning was issued for the New Orleans area. A second hurricane, Rita, was on its way. It was going to happen all over again.

**Teresa Saunders**