Hurricane Georges Essay, Research Paper

Hurricane Georges

A very massive group of levees may be all that

is in the way of lower lying New

Orleans and destruction with a visit from Hurricane

Georges. Without the levee system

and concrete flood walls Georges could have catastrophic

effects in New Orleans. But

with this man-made hurricane protection system protecting

the city people. New

Orleans is spared the casualties and damage past storms

have wrought. The levee system

is important because the city is like a saucer 6 feet below

sea level and is surrounded by

lakes, swamps, marshes and the Mississippi River. The fact

is, we are living in a large,

shallow bowl with a levee around it,” said Oliver Houck, a

Tulane University law

professor whose major is water resources. The New Orleans

area and location have

allowed hurricanes and floods to prey on its residents

since as early as 1718. A year after

New Orleans was laid out, a low levee had to be

constructed. As the city grew, the need

for a better levee system has been a lasting issue. The

levees were built taller and

stronger, but hurricanes in 1915 and 1947 flooded the city

killing about 200 and 47

people. The current hurricane protection system was

approved by Congress in 1965 after

Hurricane Betsy killed 81 people in southern Louisiana.

Hundreds of millions of dollars

has produced what may be the world’s most elaborate flood

protection system, said Jim

Addison, chief of public affairs for the U.S. Army Corps of

Engineers’ New Orleans

District, which builds and monitors the levees. The levees

along the south shore of Lake

Pontchartrain and other key areas are designed to protect

the city from a fast-moving

hurricane of Georges power. The levees work together with

channels that shift flood

waters to strong pumping stations. Then water is sent back

into the lake. But Georges is

moving slowly, meaning up to 25 inches of rain could fall

on New Orleans and the wind

could push the lake over the levees.

Hurricane Georges caused an estimated $1 billion

in insured property damage in

four Gulf Coast states. This made it the costliest

hurricane in the United States this year.,

The cost is nearly three times as much as that of Hurricane

Bonnie, which cost insurers in

the North and South Carolina and Virginia $360 million

earlier this year. And Georges

cost dominates the $25 million in damage from this year’s

Hurricane Earl, which edged

the Florida coast, Georgia and South Carolina .But Georges

cost is not close to the $15.5

billion in insured losses from Hurricane Andrew, which hit

south Florida, Louisiana and

Texas in 1992. It’s the nation’s costliest hurricane.The

Projections do not include flood

damage, which is not covered by homeowners’ insurance. The

flooding is bad news for

thousands of homeowners returning to their waterlogged

property and for taxpayers. Most

homeowners in the counties hit by Georges had not purchased

flood protection from the

Federal Emergency Management Agency, which means they will

likely seek low-interest

federal loans to help recover. Insured storm damage from

Hurricane Georges also was

estimated at $1 billion in the Caribbean. Most of those

losses, in a region where just 30%

of households are insured, came from damage to businesses.

Nearly a month after Hurricane Georges hit the

islands of the northern Caribbean,

bodies of the dead are still turning up in Haiti, pushing

the Caribbean death toll higher

and higher. Poor communications in Haiti delayed reports on

deaths, injuries and

damages from the storm. Its toll has risen to 213 and is

likely to top 240, a civil defense

official said Monday. Georges is now being blamed for

killing at least 509 people across

the Caribbean, including 283 in the Dominican Republic. A

report on storm damage from

Haiti’s northern district has yet to be completed, he said.

Some 30 people were reported

missing and feared dead from the storm, which struck Haiti

on Sept. 23, Deslorges said.

Most of the Haitian deaths were blamed on flooding and mud

slides in rural, mountainous

areas. For generations, Haitian peasants have cut down

trees to make charcoal, denuding

mountains and leaving them unable to absorb rainfall. A

flash flood nearly destroyed the

southeastern border town of Fonds Verrettes, where 102

people died. Georges destroyed

thousands of homes and killed more than 56,000 head of

livestock, Deslorges said.

Finance and Economics Minister Fred Joseph has estimated

agricultural damage at more

than $300 million. The United States has provided $12

million in relief aid, Taiwan

$300,000 and the U.N. Development Program $100,000. Canada,

Germany and Japan

also have donated relief funds and supplies. Georges killed

five people in Cuba, three in

Puerto Rico, three in St. Kitts and Nevis, and two in

Antigua.

Hurricane Georges crashed into the Dominican Republic on

September 22, 1998,

touching off flood waters that swallowed up hundreds,

perhaps thousands, of flimsy

homes along a river bank in the Sabana Perdida shantytown.

The storm killed more than

370 people in the Caribbean over 200 in the Dominican

Republic alone – and four in the

United States. It also drove 7,000 slum dwellers into a

half dozen squalid shelters in the

capital, Santo Domingo. Damages to farms, roads and

buildings from the late September

1998 rampage of Hurricane Georges surpassed $1.2 billion in

the Dominican Republic.

The hurricane hit several large islands in its march across

the Caribbean, but damage and

death were especially heavy in the Dominican Republic. In

addition to personnel and

supplies from the United States, aid came in from France,

Spain, Italy, Canada, Chile and

other nations. The government also sought help from the

World Bank and other

international agencies. Only 5% of the country’s tourism

centers were damaged by the

storm,Montas said. But some of the natural beauty that

draws tourists will need time to

recover.”Our ecology has suffered serious damages from the

severe deforestation caused

by the hurricane,” said Omar Ramirez, director of national

parks. Underscoring the

desperation after Georges, a mob of hungry people swarmed

an aid convoy bringing food,

water and second-hand clothes from the United States to

victims of Hurricane Georges.

Relief workers and police beat them back with sticks, to

little avail. In the end, the aid

went not to those most in need, but to those who could jump

the highest, shoulder the

heaviest burdens and bear the most punishment. A self-made

millionaire who grew up in

New York, Fernando Mateo, organized relief shipments in

hopes of taking aid straight to

the people. The Dominican-born businessman said previous

disaster relief and

government assistance to the poor had been stolen by

corrupt officials or manipulated for

political gain.Donated by thousands of Dominican immigrants

living in New York City

and New Jersey, the provisions were delivered to one of the

capital’s most impoverished

areas. But what began as a well-intentioned and orderly

relief effort quickly became

chaotic. Hundreds of residents pushed past a chain-link

fence at a refugee compound

where the aid trucks were parked. A call to form single-

file lines outside the 10-foot

barrier was ignored, as hungry people squeezed through

narrow cracks or scrambled over

the top of the fence despite barbed wire that sliced their

bare feet. After futile attempts to

swat back the surging throng, volunteers manning the trucks

began to hurl boxes, bottles

and bags. City official Alejandro Obrero said the mad

scramble for aid showed how

precariously people were living even before the latest

disaster.”There’s an immense

poverty in the Dominican Republic,” he said. “The hurricane

didn’t create that. It just

brought it bubbling to the surface.”

Bulldozing across Puerto Rico on September 21,

1998, Hurricane Georges served

up a powerful reminder of what nature can do: rivers

overflowed, trees were strewn like

matchsticks across highways, and 4 million people were left

without power.At least five

Puerto Ricans were killed – along with at least six others

who died as a result of the storm

elsewhere in the Caribbean. Damages reached $2 billion.

Although accustomed to

hurricanes every few years, Puerto Ricans were stunned by

the widespread impact of

Georges. Its 110 mph winds spared not an inch of the U.S.

territory as it swept westward

after hitting ground late September 21,1998.President

Clinton declared Puerto Rico a

disaster area. Georges raked the island, denuding

hillsides, toppling power lines, peeling

off roofs. Road signs on the Luis A. Ferre Expressway

simply disappeared, billboards

were flung aside and street debris ranged from porch

awnings to a Gulf gasoline station

sign.As the rains receded, rivers swelled, overflowing

their banks in the northern coastal

towns of Arecibo and Barceloneta. The tree-lined streets of

Barceloneta were under 4 feet

of water, and more than 200 homes lost their roofs. In the

capital of San Juan, where

almost half the island’s people live, the typical sight was

that of downed trees – in some

areas most were felled onto roads or broken in half. Some

flooded roads were impossible

to traverse. There were also many downed power lines – so

many that all of Puerto Rico

was blacked out. The state power company urged retirees to

report to work and asked for

help from private contractors. Damage to the power grid

alone was estimated at $60

million. In the east coast town of Humacao, 4 feet of water

surged into the municipal

government building. The police headquarters in the central

city of Caguas was

destroyed. In the southern city of Ponce, which suffered

some of the worst winds and

rain, damage totaled $50 million. Damage was expected to

far exceed that of Hurricane

Hugo in 1989, which crossed only the northeast corner of

the island and paralyzed San

Juan for weeks. The home of Paula Aponte Figueroa had its

roof blown off and deposited

on top of the house of her neighbor, Pedrom Juan Morales.

It even stripped the paneling

off the walls inside Aponte’s wooden home in San Juan’s

Hato Rey section.”This thing

was a monster,” said Morales, who lost part of his roof

and suffered flood damage. ”Hugo

was a little breeze compared to this.”

The stalks of rice were covered in mud shortly

after Georges struck in late

September, 1998, but the Haitian farmer, naked from the

waist up, thrashed them against

a rock in a cloud of dust to dislodge the under-ripe, dirty

- and precious – grains.

Throughout the Artibonite Valley in central Haiti – the

breadbasket of a nation that even

in good times can’t feed itself – floods unleashed by

Hurricane Georges devastated crops

almost ready for harvest. Haiti is the hemisphere’s poorest

country and could ill afford a

setback like this. Many people are undernourished, per

capita income is $250 a year and

life expectancy is among the world’s lowest 57 years. At

least 167 people were killed in

Haiti by Georges. Forty years ago, Fonds Verrettes

flourished at the foot of wooded

mountains, but farm incomes fell and impoverished peasants

cut down trees to make

charcoal. With no forest cover to absorb Georges’

torrential rains, storm runoff crashed

through the town, destroying dozens of homes and

buildings.In the village of Jean-Denis,

people boiled musty rice in huge cauldrons to try to make

it suitable for sale. Thousands

of subsistence farmers hacked away at their crops, trying

to harvest them before they rot.

Heavy rain in the mountains from Hurricane Georges

overwhelmed a hydroelectric dam

and sent a wave of water spilling into this eroded valley.

Both the Artibonite River and

hundreds of irrigation canals dug crosswise into the

fertile ground soon overran their

banks. Huge stretches of the valley were transformed into a

lake, leaving thousands

stranded. Georges did produce a windfall of sorts in the

nearby village of Salifoudret,

where it flooded houses, then deposited tons of sand on top

of the ready-for-harvest rice

fields. Each fall, in the rainy season, sand washes into

Salifoudret and the residents gather

it to sell to construction companies for $16 a truckload.

The deposits have never been as

big as this year, residents said, as dozens loaded 150-

pound baskets of sand on their

heads and sorted it into 6-foot piles along the riverbed so

trucks could cart it away.