

# 2 million flee as Gustav lashes Louisiana



**NECK-DEEP WOES:** Sarah Salley walks through floodwater in New Orleans on Monday. — PHOTO: REUTERS

**NEW ORLEANS:** Hurricane Gustav sent strong winds and lashing rains into New Orleans early on Monday, but the storm lost some of its power and was expected to move ashore to the west, sparing the city its full force.

Gustav weakened to a category 2 hurricane shortly before making landfall, although it was already pounding Louisiana's coastal areas with torrential rain and hurricane force winds. U.S. crude oil futures slipped to below \$114 a barrel on Monday morning as fears of major damage to oil facilities in the Gulf of Mexico eased.

Nearly 2 million people fled the Gulf Coast in one of the biggest evacuations in U.S. history and only 10,000 were believed to have remained in New Orleans. More than 11 million residents in five U.S. states were threatened by the storm. Forecasters said Gustav was carrying maximum

sustained winds of around 175 km per hour, making it a category 2 storm on the five-step Saffir-Simpson scale.

In the city, devastated by the floodwaters from Hurricane Katrina three years ago, residents on talk radio reported some power outages, but also relief that the storm seemed to be less destructive than originally feared. "It looks as though it is far less than we had expected but we are just beginning to see the full force of the hurricane," said David Blake, a talk show host. The U.S. National Hurricane Center said Gustav was still likely to toss up "an extremely dangerous storm surge" of up to 14 feet, which could test the holding power of rebuilt levees that failed during Hurricane Katrina.

Katrina brought a 28-foot surge that burst levees on August 29, 2005, and flooded some 80 per cent of New Orleans, which sits partly below

sea level. The city degenerated into chaos as stranded storm victims waited days for government rescue and law and order collapsed.

The police and several thousand National Guard troops patrolled the empty city, as a curfew went into effect in a bid to prevent looting. It was expected to swamp parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas and Texas with up to 12 inches of rain and 20 inches in some small areas. Isolated tornadoes were also possible.

Gustav's approach had stirred uneasy comparisons to Katrina, which killed some 1,500 people and caused over \$80 billion in damage. President George W. Bush, who was criticised for the slow relief efforts after Katrina, cancelled his appearance at the Republican convention as scheduled instead a visit to Texas on Monday to oversee emergency response effort.

After accusations of botching Katrina relief efforts, the government lined up trains and buses to evacuate 30,000 people who could not leave on their own.

## Low-key convention

Hurricane Gustav may have done what nothing else could when the storm forced John McCain and fellow Republicans to scrap the highly partisan speeches and hoopla planned for Monday in St. Paul, Minnesota, as they set aside politics for a business-only opening session of their national convention.

"This is an overwhelming thing. Let's hope and pray that it's not going to be so severe," Mr. McCain told NBC TV on Monday. Acknowledging that he felt some frustration, he added: "This is just one of those moments in history where you have to put America first." Reuters, AP