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TIDAL THREAT

Tsunami's Tragedy a Reminder of Area Vulnerability

Tropical Storm Mathew was little noticed by the public and the press as Ivan and other storms wreaked havoc in Florida. Its flood waters pale in comparison to the tsunamis' tragic flooding in the Indian Ocean.

The concern from Tropical Storm Mathew is that it compares closely to Hurricane Juan. It had less wind than Juan, affected South Louisiana for only a day and a half compared to over 3½ days for Hurricane Juan, yet the elevation of water rose over forty miles inland to levels equal to Hurricane Juan. Water elevations from the Intercoastal Canal in Larose to the Harvey Canal in Jefferson were as high as or higher than Hurricane Juan, in spite of the fact that water elevations were not as high south of the Intercoastal as was experienced for Hurricane Juan.

These events point to the fact that Intercoastal is becoming more tidal which indicates the arms of the sea reaching further inland more frequently.

This situation lends itself to the discussion between what damage Ivan possibly could have caused to Louisiana as compared to the destruction Hurricane Betsy did cause almost 40 years ago on September 9, 1965. With the knowledge that Hurricane Betsy was the last major storm to directly hit southeast Louisiana, it is obvious that we can expect more damage further inland than occurred in 1965. Although Grand Isle never recovered totally from Betsy, a much greater part of Louisiana will not recover from a major hurricane due to our weakened natural land structures.

As we plan for another year of dealing with our threats from the Gulf, the stories from the flooded areas of the Indian Ocean are similar in effect to those recorded from the survivors of the 1893 hurricane which killed over 2,000 people in Louisiana. Although the 1893 storm added darkness and 110 mph winds, the similarities were that of rushing water ripping children from their parents' arms and survival based solely on luck if you were caught in the water. Similar to the accounts of the tsunami survivors is the testimony on video tape of 90 year old Daize Cheramie as he tells on of his memories as a 5 year old experiencing the 1893 hurricane. He shares his emotional account of people helplessly swirling in waters which killed half of the 1700 population community of Cheniere Caminada.

The accounts of Cheniere and those of the recent tsunami, along with other flood tragedies, demonstrate the potential of massive loss of life from tidal flooding. The conditions which lead to this kind of loss is that the people are caught outside of substantial structures, or the structures in which they have sought shelter are over-topped or collapse. With these two conditions it is primarily luck which determines survival.

These flood events also point to the fact that in hurricane events the greatest potential for death remains the storm surge.

Although Hurricane Audrey in June 1957 was the last time a storm surge has killed hundreds of people, every major storm has the potential to kill thousands. The other hurricane hazards—wind, rain and tornadoes, do not have as great a potential for massive deaths. The loss of life from the recent tsunami reminds us that we should all be prepared for the tidal threat.

—Windell A. Curole
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