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U.S.

Storm's Push North Leaves Punishing Inland Floods

By **ABBY GOODNOUGH** and **DANNY HAKIM** AUG. 29, 2011

CHESTER, Vt. — While most eyes warily watched the shoreline during Hurricane Irene's grinding ride up the East Coast, it was inland — sometimes hundreds of miles inland — where the most serious damage actually occurred. And the major culprit was not wind, but water.

As blue skies and temperate breezes returned on Monday, a clearer picture of the storm's devastation emerged, with the gravest consequences stemming from river flooding in Vermont and upstate New York.

Here in southern Vermont, normally picturesque towns and villages were digging out from thick mud and piles of debris that Sunday's floodwaters left behind. With roughly 250 roads and several bridges closed off, many residents remained stranded in their neighborhoods; others could not get to grocery stores, hospitals or work. It was unclear how many people had been displaced, though the Red Cross said more than 300 had stayed in its shelters on Sunday, and it expected the number to grow.

In upstate New York, houses were swept from their foundations, and a woman drowned on Sunday when an overflowing creek submerged the cottage where she was vacationing. Flash floods continued to be a concern into Monday afternoon. In the

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looked like a jumble of homes lay across a roadway, as if they had been tossed like Lego pieces.

“We were very lucky in the city, not quite as lucky on Long Island, but we were lucky on Long Island,” Mr. Cuomo said. “But Catskills, mid-Hudson, this is a different story and we paid a terrible price here, and many of these communities are communities that could least afford to pay this kind of price. So the state has its hands full.”

In Vermont, officials recovered the body of a man who was tending the municipal water system in Rutland during the storm. They said his son, who was with him at the time, was also feared dead. A 21-year-old woman died after being swept into the Deerfield River in Wilmington, a small town west of Brattleboro. And a man was found dead in Ludlow. As of Monday afternoon, the storm had caused at least 40 deaths in 11 states, according to The Associated Press.

“This is a really tough battle for us,” Gov. Peter Shumlin of Vermont said after surveying the damage across the state in a helicopter. “What you see is farms destroyed, crops destroyed, businesses underwater, houses eroded or swept away and widespread devastation.”

In the Catskills, state and local officials had, by Monday afternoon, carried out 191 rescues since the storm began, often plucking people from cars or homes as water rose. State officials confirmed six people had died in connection with the storm: five drowned and one was electrocuted.

Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey said his state was facing some of the worst inland flooding it had seen in years. Many small streams are now at flood level and some larger rivers — including the Ramapo, Passaic and Delaware — were peaking on Monday or expected to peak over the next 24 hours, reaching record or near-record levels. Almost 200 New Jersey roads were either partially or fully closed. About 110 people were forced to leave their homes Monday morning in Vineland and 60 people in Millville because of possible breach of two dams in the area.

In Connecticut, officials were grappling with damage from the storm surge on Long Island Sound, which punished shore communities like East Haven and Milford, as well

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office, said some waterways, like the Connecticut River, were not expected to crest until Wednesday.

Hundreds of miles to the south, in North Carolina, where Hurricane Irene first made landfall, state-operated ferries began on Monday to move personnel and supplies to Hatteras Island on the Outer Banks, where an estimated 2,500 residents remained cut off from the mainland by damage to the main highway.

And all up the East Coast, an estimated five million people remained without power on Monday, including more than 800,000 in New York State, with work crews working frantically to restore service.

Most New York City residents would have power restored fairly quickly, state officials said. "Upstate is a more difficult situation," said Howard B. Glaser, director of state operations for the Cuomo administration. "It's not safe to go into some of these areas."

Some places could see extended blackouts lasting into next week, Mr. Glaser said.

In Chester, Vt., a village of about 3,000 on the Williams River, Thelma Dezaine's 7-year-old son looked out their window as torrential rain fell Sunday and started screaming.

"He was saying, 'We've all got to get out of here; we're all going to die,'" said Ms. Dezaine, who was pulling sodden furniture and clothing from the first floor of the house she rents here. "We didn't have time to grab anything because the water rose too fast."

Her neighbor, Mike Surething, who had four feet of water in his house, said, "As soon as the river crested that bank over there, within half an hour it was up to our windows."

Of his modest home, he said, "Everything in there is a loss."

Down the road in Rockingham, Heath Stevens, 42, was taking pictures of a covered bridge that appeared to barely survive the floods. Several others around the state were swept away, just as a number of historic homes tumbled into brooks.

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Central Vermont was affected, too. In Waterbury, a state office complex that houses more than 1,000 workers was flooded, and officials said they would evacuate all patients in the state psychiatric hospital there.

In Rutland, Sandy Cabell spent most of the storm in her basement keeping floodwaters at bay while a small river — she figured five feet wide and more than two feet deep with periodic whitecaps — flowed through the lowest point in her yard.

Neighborhoods below hers were evacuated and were underwater for hours, Ms. Cabell said. One neighbor sent her a video of a sinkhole 50 feet wide where a highway used to be, just two miles away from her.

“I haven’t ventured out today because I don’t want to see anymore,” said Ms. Cabell, a retiree who grew up in the area and returned 21 years ago. “It is a beautiful day today. You wouldn’t think it was so cruel yesterday.”

About 300 guests were trapped Monday by a flooded road at the Inn of the Six Mountains in Killington, where part of the K-1 ski lodge had also collapsed because of flooding damage, The Associated Press reported.

In Greene County, N.Y., several bridges were wiped out and numerous roads were impassable, stranding residents in remote mountaintop areas, said Shaun Groden, a county administrator.

“You have the wash-outs, you have houses coming off foundations because of flash flooding,” Mr. Groden said from the county’s emergency operations center, in Cairo, noting that Prattsville was the hardest-hit town.

“It’s been devastated,” Mr. Groden said of Prattsville, adding that the towns of Windham, Jewett and Lexington were also hard hit. “People last night were saying it looks like a war zone.”

Mr. Groden said four helicopters that were to deliver medical supplies and other provisions to stranded residents, who he said had “hunkered down” during the storm, had been grounded Sunday night because of strong crosswinds.

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Mr. Groden said that counties beyond Greene County had been blindsided by the storm, too. The county manager for nearby Schoharie had said the normally slow-moving Schoharie Creek “had more volume than Niagara Falls.”

In Fleischmanns, N.Y., an 82-year-old Brooklyn woman vacationing with a group of friends from her Hasidic Jewish community in a Catskill motel drowned after a creek overflowed and engulfed her one-story cottage. More than six feet of water swept the cottage more than 30 feet from its foundation.

In Maplecrest, a hamlet of Windham, N.Y., the storm caused widespread flooding from the Batavia Kill. Jere and Diane Baker were trying to shore up what remained of their blue stucco house standing amid new 20-foot craters in their front yard. On Sunday afternoon, they realized that flooding was inevitable; numerous trees had been uprooted by the water, eroding the banks. The Bakers evacuated to higher ground, taking their trailer.

They returned Monday and saw the damage: half of their front yard had been washed away, and the house’s foundation was crumbling.

“I’ve lived here even before they had a dam and I’ve never seen anything like this,” said Mr. Baker, 62.

A bit down the road, Tom and Mary Donovan recalled the sound of a rumble at 3 a.m. on Monday, as an adjacent hill began roaring toward their house.

“We threw the lights on,” Ms. Donovan said. “We couldn’t believe it.”

Abby Goodnough reported from Chester, Vt., and Danny Hakim from Albany. Reporting was contributed by Noah Rosenberg from Cairo, N.Y.; Susanne Craig from Windham, N.Y.; Dirk Van Susteren from Waterbury, Vt.; Amy Zuckerman from Amherst, Mass.; Kevin Sack from Atlanta; and Lisa W. Foderaro, Thomas Kaplan, Lori Moore and Susan Saulny from New York.

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