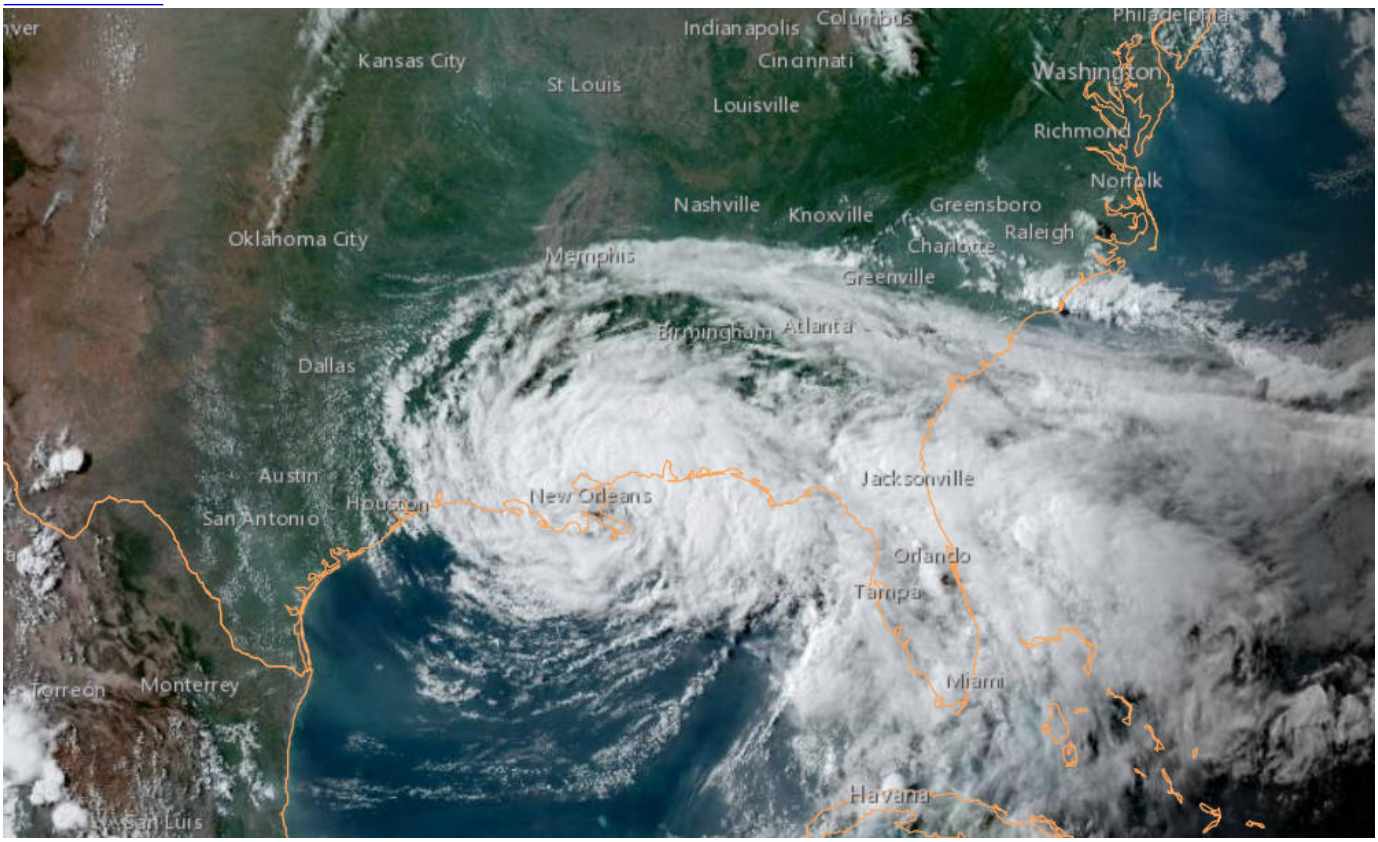
News
EarthBeat



Satellite imagery shows Tropical Storm Cristobal in the Gulf of Mexico on June 7. (NOAA.gov)



by Jesse Remedios

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Atlantic hurricane season is expected to be busier than usual this year, raising a range of concerns about the ability of Catholic and government agencies to effectively respond to weather-related disasters amid a pandemic.

The novel coronavirus poses unique challenges for disaster preparedness, said Kim Burgo, senior director of disaster response operations at Catholic Charities USA. She pointed to offering virtual emergency management services, executing socially distant evacuations and setting up socially distant shelters as serious challenges facing relief efforts this year.

Under COVID-19, "everyone in the world has become a disaster survivor," Burgo said. "When you add an additional disaster like a hurricane," existing hardship only "becomes exacerbated."

On Sunday, Tropical Storm Cristobal made landfall in southeastern Louisiana. It downgraded Monday to a tropical depression, and is expected to continue north up the Mississippi River this week.

Cristobal is the first storm in what the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicts will be an above-normal 2020 hurricane season, which runs June 1-Nov. 30, with more named storms than usual. While climate change is not thought to cause a higher frequency of hurricanes, research does suggest that hurricane intensity increases as a result of global warming. A study published in May in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences found that hurricanes worldwide have become stronger in the past four decades.

As the leader of Catholic Charities USA's disaster response team, Burgo has been working with local Catholic Charities agencies around the country to help prepare for what potential relief efforts might look like and the likely obstacles they'll see. In May, the Federal Emergency Management Agency released its COVID-19 operational guidelines for the 2020 hurricane season.

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The first point of concern in a disaster scenario is likely to be evacuations, which will take more time and require more equipment in the middle of a pandemic.

"Many people have traditionally been evacuated by buses to get them out of their communities," Burgo said. "Well, a school bus that holds 66 people is now only going to be able to hold like 20. So, you're going to need more buses, and it's going to take a much longer time."

"That in itself is going to have an impact right from the beginning," she added.

Another difficulty for communities will be safely sheltering the victims of hurricanes and storm surge.

"We are accustomed to having a shelter, but under COVID-19, congregate care is pretty much disallowed. We're not going to have shelters, so people are going to have to stay in a hotel," Burgo said.

The use of hotels for sheltering survivors brings with it a range of questions, Burgo pointed out. For instance, what do people do with pets if a hotel does not allow them? And will victims be able to afford hotels, especially if they have to stay more than a few days?

And if shelters do open, at hotels or otherwise, social distancing constraints mean there will likely be more of them set up, Burgo said. "Who manages all those extra shelters?"

How can the general public prepare for a disaster?

Kim Burgo, senior director of disaster response operations at Catholic Charities USA, offers this advice to people who want to prepare for hurricanes or other potential disasters:

- Know your insurance policies.
- Try to have a place to evacuate to, just in case.
- Have emergency supplies in the house, including extra water and a disaster kit.
- Check out Ready.gov, a website of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, to create an emergency plan for you and your family.

Another major impact of the pandemic is that FEMA may not set up traditional Disaster Recovery Centers, Burgo said. Instead, the agency will try to get information to survivors virtually about programs and services.

"What if you don't have electricity, or are evacuated out of state? How do you really access that kind of virtual information or understand what's happening?" the Catholic Charities official said.

Other potential ripple effects exist.

Access to essential goods may be in short supply because of panic buying. In addition, a smaller number of volunteers may be available due to fears of exposure to the coronavirus. Both scenarios would negatively impact Catholic organizations' relief efforts.

Catholic Charities USA has been considering these issues for a while. In late March, it created a 22-page internal document to help member agencies take stock and prepare themselves in advance for additional challenges they could see in disaster scenarios this year.

While she knows all outcomes won't be accounted for in those 22 pages, Burgo is optimistic her organization's proactiveness will make a difference.

"Every disaster is different. It brings its own nuances," she said. "You might not be able to plan for a specific need … but it's better to have one thing to tackle that you didn't plan for than 50."

"We're all exploring this together."

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This story appears in the **Saints Next Door** feature series. View the full series.