

Weather

Buildings ripped apart

Hurricane Zeta slams Gulf Coast, one dead

NEW ORLEANS, Oct 29, (AP): Hurricane Zeta slammed into the storm-weary Gulf Coast on Wednesday, pelting the New Orleans metro area with rain and howling winds that ripped apart buildings and knocked out power to thousands before rapidly making its way through Mississippi and Alabama with strong gusty winds, heavy rains and dangerous storm surge.

Zeta weakened to a Category 1 hurricane with winds of 80 mph (128 kph) as it moved into southern Mississippi few hours after landfall, but forecasters said it remained a life-threatening storm. The storm was about 45 miles (72 kilometers) northeast of Hattiesburg early Wednesday. A 91 mph (146 kph) wind gust blew through Mobile, Alabama, Tuesday and a NOAA gauge reported a 10-foot storm surge in Waveland, Mississippi.

Even as Zeta battered the south, the upcoming election was still on the mind of some residents.

"A lot of roads are blocked off right now cause the trees and other debris that have fallen. With the election I just kind of hope the city gets the roads clear by November 3rd so everybody can get out and vote," said Mackenzie Umanzo, 19. "Hopefully everybody can show up who wants to show up," the D'Iberville, Mississippi, resident said.



LaToya

The storm killed at least one person, a 55-year-old man who a Louisiana coroner said was electrocuted by a downed power line in New Orleans, and officials said life-threatening conditions would last into Thursday in a region already pounded by multiple storms this year.

St. Bernard Parish President Guy McInnis said emergency workers were doing their best to respond to reports of people in distress after their roofs were blown off.

"Guys, we received the brunt of Zeta, and Zeta gave us a good punch," McInnis told WDSU-TV.

Roads were flooded near the coast, where forecasters said Zeta made landfall around Terrebonne Bay near Cocodrie, an unincorporated fishing village at the end of a highway with few if any full-time residents and a marine laboratory where a building was inundated.

Roofs

Streams of rainfall ran off roofs in New Orleans' famed French Quarter, signs outside bars and restaurants swayed back and forth in the wind and palm trees along Canal Street whipped furiously. Officials said a person was hospitalized with minor injuries after a structure collapsed, but further details weren't available.

With much of the city in the dark and more than 200 trees reported down, New Orleans Mayor **LaToya Cantrell** implored residents to stay home and let city officials assess the damage instead of going out and doing it themselves.

"Although we have made it through, we have been damaged, we have been hit," she said.

More than 875,000 customers were without electricity in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, including about 350,000 in metro New Orleans. Outages were mounting quickly as the storm moved northeastward across the Deep South.

Zeta had top sustained winds of 110 mph (177 kph) as a Category 2 hurricane at landfall and is the 27th named storm of a historically busy Atlantic hurricane season - with over a month left to go. It set a new record as the 11th named storm to make landfall in the continental U.S. in a single season, well beyond the nine storms that hit in 1916.

As much as 5 feet of Gulf water surrounded a casino in Biloxi, Mississippi, and deputies in Harrison County, Mississippi, received multiple calls from people who had remained in mobile homes that were threatened by winds.

"It's bad, it really is," Peterson told WLOX-TV. President Donald Trump approved an emergency declaration for Mississippi Wednesday evening.

Tropical storm warnings were issued as far away as southern Virginia, highly unusual for the region. Forecasters issued a string of tornado warnings for as far east as the Florida Panhandle.

New Orleans was in the warning areas of six previous storms that veered east or west this season. This time, Zeta stayed on course.

Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards said in a radio interview that boats broke loose and struck a bridge in Lafitte. He said blackouts were extensive, including 94% without power in Plaquemines Parish.

"The wind has caused extensive structural damages to businesses, to homes, to electrical infrastructure," Edwards said.

Officials had urged people to take precautions, and a business-as-usual atmosphere in the morning in New Orleans diminished as the storm neared and grew stronger. Traffic slowed, and restaurants and coffee shops shut down.

Avoiding

"This year, the storms have been coming back-to-back. They've been avoiding New Orleans but finally decided to come," cookie shop worker Curt Brumfield said.

Winds picked up and water rose above the docks in Jean Lafitte, a small fishing town south of New Orleans that takes its name from a French pirate. Workers drove truckloads of sand to low-lying areas where thousands of sandbags were already stacked for previous storms.

"We're going to get a lot of water fast," said the mayor, Tim Kerner Jr.

Zeta's wind, rain and storm surge reached more than 150 miles (241 kilometers) east of New Orleans. In Mississippi, streetlights swayed in Biloxi and the city of Pass Christian ordered all boats out of the harbor. Dauphin Island, Alabama, shut off water and sewer service in areas that typically are swamped in storms.

New Orleans officials announced that a turbine that generates power to the city's aging drainage pump system broke down Sunday, with no quick repair in sight. There was enough power to keep the pumps operating if needed, but little excess power to tap if other turbines fail, officials said.

Forecasters called for anywhere from 2 to 6 inches (5 to 15 centimeters) of rain to fall in the New Orleans area.

Before landfall, Zeta's top winds had risen to just shy of a major, Category 3 storm, according to the U.S. National Hurricane Center.

On Tuesday, Zeta raked across Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, toppling trees and briefly cutting power to more than 300,000 people but causing no deaths.

It then regained strength over the Gulf of Mexico along a path slightly to the east of those of Hurricane Laura, which was blamed for at least 27 deaths in Louisiana in August, and Hurricane Delta, which exacerbated Laura's damage in the same area weeks later.

"I'm physically and mentally tired," a distraught Yolanda Lockett of Lake Charles, one of about 3,600 evacuees from Laura and Delta still sheltering, said outside her New Orleans hotel.

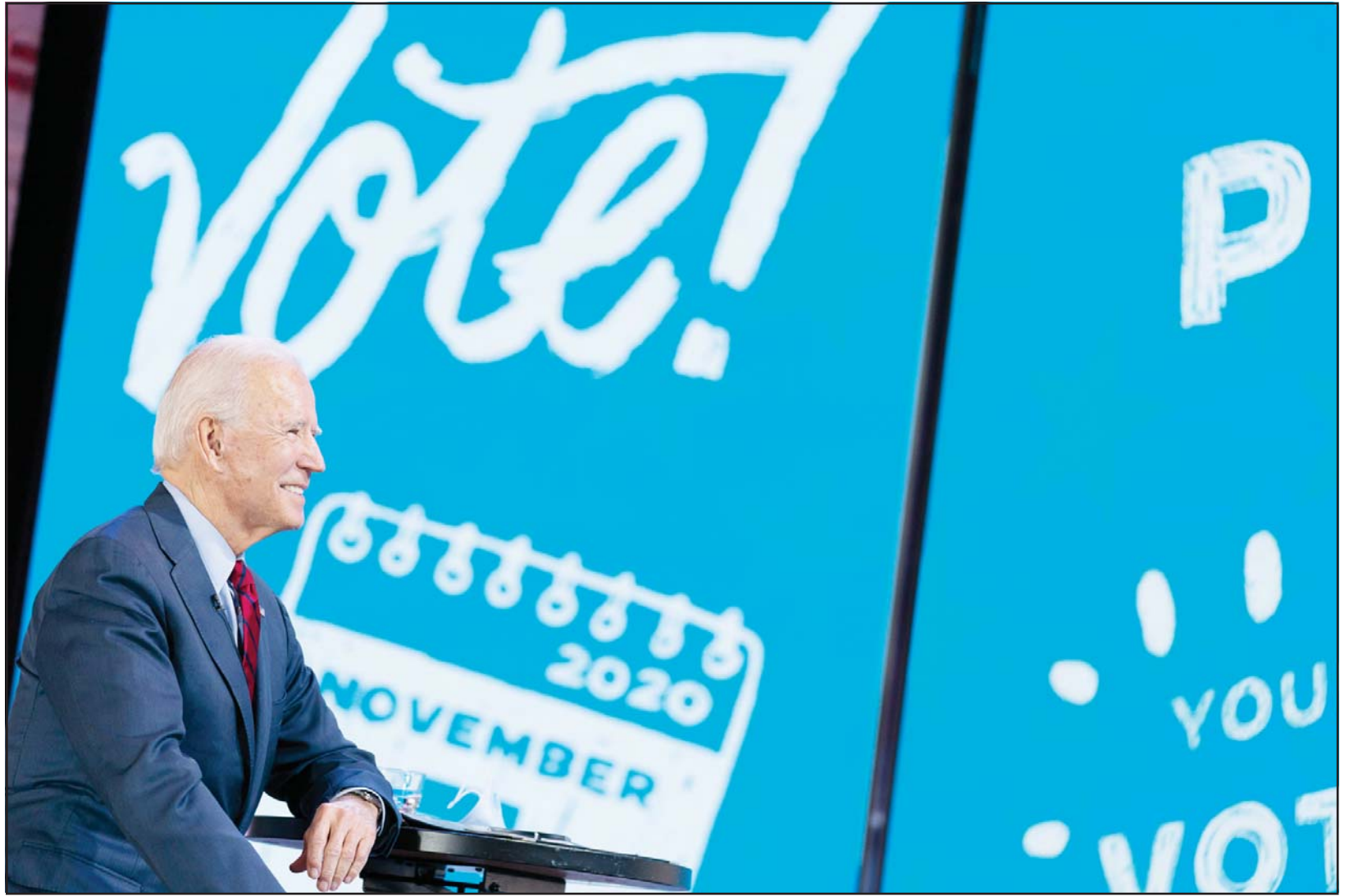
The deteriorating weather prompted early voting sites to close for hours in the western Florida Panhandle.

Tropical storm warnings were issued for a large swath of the South, from Mississippi into Alabama and Georgia, including all of the Atlanta area, where winds could gust up to 55 mph (89 kph) early Thursday. Winds could be "especially severe" in the southern Appalachian Mountains, where flash flooding is possible, the hurricane center said.

Large school systems in Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina planned to close Thursday or open late.

An average season sees six hurricanes and 12 named storms. This extraordinarily busy season has focused attention on climate change, which scientists say is causing wetter, stronger and more destructive storms.

After Hanna, Isaias, Laura, Sally and Delta, Zeta will tie a record set in 1886 and repeated in 1985 for six hurricanes smacking the continental U.S., according to Colorado State University hurricane researcher Phil Klotzbach.



Democratic presidential candidate former vice president Joe Biden appears on a 'Zoom with Oprah Winfrey' virtual show at The Queen theater in Wilmington, Delaware, Wednesday, Oct 28. (AP)

Politics

Lawsuits in hundreds filed

Taking a stand in litigated election

WASHINGTON, Oct 29, (AP): In the most litigious presidential election in memory, court fights are even happening over where poll watchers may stand as the votes are tallied.

Lawsuits by the hundreds already have been filed - with the prospect of many more before and after Tuesday's voting - as both Democrats and Republicans try to settle in court a process that is usually determined by citizens simply casting ballots.

The legal action runs along a broad spectrum, from a dispute over whether guns are allowed near polling places to more complicated matters that already have reached the Supreme Court.

"The level of litigation has just been so unprecedented," said Sophia Lin Lakin, deputy director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Voting Rights Project. "It does feel like there's a desire to elevate any possible thing. Possible misunderstandings or just disagreements with what the rules are is somehow ending up in court. It feels very different."

Roughly 300 lawsuits have been filed over the election in dozens of states across the country, and still scores remain unsettled just days before Election Day. Many involve changes to normal procedures given the coronavirus pandemic, which has killed more than 227,000 people in the U.S. and sickened more than 8.8 million.

The campaigns of President Donald Trump and his Democratic rival, Joe Biden, have been quietly building armies of lawyers preparing for the possibility of a drawn-out legal fight that lands at the Supreme Court.

The latest focus for Republicans in some places is on poll watchers, who are volunteers for candidates or political parties long used in elections. They monitor voting places and local election offices and make note of potential problems as a way to challenge the voting or tabulating process.

The role of poll watchers or challengers has gained increased attention this year as Trump has pushed unfounded

claims about the potential for voter fraud because of an increase in mailed-in ballots. Trump has been urging his supporters to go to the polls and "watch very carefully," raising concerns about possible voter intimidation. He has also falsely stated that poll watchers were "thrown out" of a polling site in Philadelphia, where he has claimed without evidence that "bad things" are happening.

In Nevada, Trump's campaign and state Republicans went to court to try to stop the counting of Las Vegas-area mail-in ballots. Republicans say observers aren't allowed close enough to workers and machines at the busy vote-counting center in suburban Las Vegas to challenge signatures in the state's biggest and most Democratic-leaning county.

Campaign

Jesse Binnall, an attorney for the Republican Party and Trump campaign, told a judge Wednesday that the counting process observed in Las Vegas prevents what he called a "meaningful opportunity" to challenge the validity of mailed ballots.

"People who vote in person can have their ballot challenged," Binnall said. "People who vote by mail cannot."

Nevada Democrats have called the lawsuit a "plain and simple" effort to suppress votes in the state's most diverse county.

"Clark County is a blue county," Gregory Zunino, deputy Nevada state solicitor general, told the judge. "They quite frankly would like to exclude as many ballots or signatures in Clark County as they can."

Nevada Republicans and the Trump campaign filed another lawsuit this week demanding the county's registrar turn over names of Democrats, Republicans and nonpartisan ballot workers, election monitors and poll watchers along with details about their work instructions and shifts.

In Michigan, a candidate for the state House of Representatives sued this

week, alleging coronavirus social distancing rules are preventing poll watchers from properly overseeing the election process. The lawsuit was quickly resolved with an agreement that poll watchers can look at election books and approach poll workers when necessary.

Meanwhile, New Mexico's highest court this week rejected a lawsuit brought by the state Republican Party alleging partisan poll challengers have been unfairly denied oversight of the initial ballot verification process. The lawsuit by Republicans including several state legislators and county clerks alleged partisan challengers are being shut out of the initial verification process unnecessarily, based on privacy regulations.

In Philadelphia, Trump's campaign filed a lawsuit this month demanding its campaign representatives be allowed to monitor people registering to vote or filling out mail-in ballots in election offices in the battleground state. A judge ruled Pennsylvania law doesn't allow such representatives to observe in election offices, and that decision was upheld by an appeals court.

Other lawsuits across the country involve when to stop counting mail-in ballots if received after Tuesday, bans on curbside voting in the pandemic, issues over drop boxes for voters and enforcing strict witness requirements.

A judge recently overturned a ban in Michigan that prevented open-carry guns at the polls. And new lawsuits keep cropping up: A man in Maryland has sued the board of elections in Harford County following his arrest last week as he tried to vote without a face mask.

Pennsylvania officials have ordered ballots received after Tuesday to be segregated after a challenge pending before the Supreme Court on whether ballots can be counted after Election Day. The court on Wednesday turned away Republicans' plea to cut the deadline for receipt of absentee ballots in North Carolina, which means they can be received up until Nov. 12.

healthcare providers." They said "malicious cyber actors" are targeting the sector with ransomware that could lead to "data theft and disruption of healthcare services."

The attacks coincide with the U.S. presidential election, but do not appear to have any connection to it.

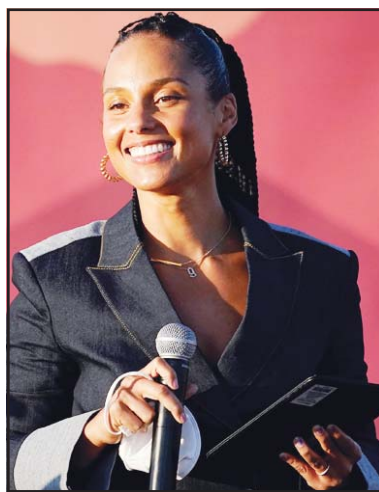
"We are experiencing the most significant cyber security threat we've ever seen in the United States," Charles Carmakal, chief technical officer of the cybersecurity firm Mandiant, said in a statement. He's concerned that the group may deploy malware to hundreds of hospitals over the next few weeks.

Alex Holden, CEO of Hold Security, which has been closely tracking the ransomware in question for more than a year, agreed that the unfolding offensive is unprecedented in magnitude for the U.S. Administrative problems caused by ransomware, which scrambles data into gibberish that can only be unlocked with software keys provided once targets pay up, could further stress hospitals burdened by a nationwide spike in COVID-19 cases. (AP)

Justice Dept charges 8: The Justice Department has charged eight people with working on behalf of the Chinese government in a pressure campaign aimed at coercing a New Jersey man who was wanted by Beijing into returning to China to face charges, officials said Wednesday.

The prosecution, which Justice Department officials said was the first of its kind, accuses the defendants of participating in a Chinese government operation known as "Fox Hunt" that was ostensibly created to help Beijing locate fugitives abroad but that US officials say in practice relied on intimidation and bullying to go after dissidents and political opponents.

Five of the eight, including an American private investigator who was hired as part of the effort, were arrested Wednesday. The other three are believed to be in China. All eight were charged with conspiring to act as illegal agents for China in a case filed in federal court in Brooklyn. (AP)



Alicia Keys speaks at a campaign event for Democratic vice presidential candidate Sen. Kamala Harris, Wednesday Oct 28, in Phoenix. (AP)



Collins



Gideon

America

Collins, Gideon clash in debate: Republican U.S. Sen. **Susan Collins** and Democratic challenger **Sara Gideon** clashed Wednesday night over attack ads, health care and the judiciary in their final debate before Election Day.

Gideon, speaker of the Maine House, sought repeatedly to link Collins with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and President Donald Trump, urging Mainers to vote for change.

Collins, chief architect of the Paycheck Protection Program that helped 250,000 Mainers, told voters she's been hard at work during the pandemic while Gideon adjourned the House seven months ago.

On health care, Collins said the proposed public health option supported by Gideon would cause many rural hospitals to close, while Collins said she cast the deciding vote to spare the ACA and protect people with preexisting conditions.

"These are the facts. Not even millions of dollars and misleading ads will change that," the senator said.

Gideon accused Collins and McConnell of undermining the Affordable Care Act with no plan for a replacement.

"They spent 10 years trying to take the Affordable Care Act from you," she said of Republicans.

It was the fifth and final debate. Unlike the previous debates, this one featured only the two leading candidates squaring off one-on-one near the end of a costly race that could help determine which party controls the Senate. Polls suggest a tight race.

The event came just days after Collins voted against the president's latest Supreme Court nominee, Amy Coney Barrett. Collins said she did so not based on Barrett's qualifications, but based on fairness, since Republicans denied an election year vote on one of President Barack Obama's nominees. Gideon used Trump's judicial appointments to attack Collins on women's reproductive rights, and on health care. Collins noted that her opponent declined to say whether she'd support packing the Supreme Court with additional justices. Collins wants to keep the court at nine. Both candidates also accused the other of running misleading ads. (AP)

Evacuation orders lifted: Thousands of Californians were allowed to return to their homes Wednesday as calmer winds helped firefighters beat back two wind-driven wildfires that had spurred widespread evacuations.

Roughly 100,000 people were ordered to evacuate Monday after the wildfires broke out in brushy hills above cities in Southern California's Orange County amid fierce winds and extremely dry weather conditions.

On Wednesday, evacuation orders were lifted for all residents in the city of Irvine about 35 miles (56 kilometers) south of Los Angeles, which saw more than a quarter of its 280,000 people forced from their homes. Evacuation orders also were lifted for the nearby Blue Ridge Fire, where thousands of people in Yorba Linda and neighboring communities had been under orders to flee.

Firefighters made progress as the winds subsided and the spread of the flames slowed.

The Irvine-area Silverado Fire was 32% contained by Wednesday evening and the Blue Ridge Fire to the north was 23% surrounded after being virtually uncontained a day earlier.

"With favorable weather, fire crews will find opportunities to establish more control lines," the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire, said in a statement.

The Silverado Fire burned 21 square miles (54 square kilometers). No homes were lost but two firefighters remained hospitalized after suffering second- and third-degree burns over large areas of their bodies, Orange County Fire Authority Chief Brian Fennessey said.

The Blue Ridge Fire, at 22.4 square miles (58 square kilometers), destroyed one struc-

ture and damaged seven.

Two firefighters who battled the Silverado Fire were hospitalized after suffering second- and third-degree burns, Orange County Fire Authority Chief Brian Fennessey said. (AP)

□ □ □

FBI warns ransomware assault: Federal agencies warned that cybercriminals are unleashing a major ransomware assault against the U.S. healthcare system.

Independent security experts say it has already hobbled at least four US hospitals this month, and could potentially impact hundreds more.

In a joint alert Wednesday, the FBI and two federal agencies warned that they had "credible information of an increased and imminent cybercrime threat to US hospitals and



Meigs County resident Sharon Gibson holds a cross and a candle up during a candlelight vigil to memorialize bus driver Lisa Dillard and a seven-year-old student who lost their lives, Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2020 in Decatur, Tennessee. Federal and state authorities on Wednesday investigated a crash between a school bus carrying 24 children and a utility vehicle that killed the bus driver and a 7-year-old girl in eastern Tennessee. (AP)