

## Expert predicts U.S. will be battered by storms for decades

by Sue Anne Pressley  
The Washington Post

MIAMI — It is almost time for John Rumble to put away the plywood sheets that covered the windows of his home, to start drinking the extra water he had stocked in his pantry, to stop watching the Weather Channel quite so avidly. On Tuesday, November 30, the long-nerve-racking, quirk-filled hurricane season of 1999 will finally draw to a close.

That would be not a minute too soon for Rumble, who, like many Miamians living in this prime hurricane zone, gets frayed nerves as the season progresses.

However, it might be that the worst is yet to come, stretching several decades into the future. William Gray, one of the country's prominent hurricane forecasters, announced last week from his admittedly offshore location at Colorado State University that a new era of intense hurricane activity is about to unfold. Likely to be hit more than ever, he said, will be the Caribbean islands, the East Coast of the United States and the Florida peninsula.

The last intense era of hurricane activity ended in the 1960's, Gray said, when Florida and the East Coast were not nearly so extensively developed. During the relatively quiet period that stretched from 1970 to 1994, more people were lured to the shoreline, and, therefore, many more homes and businesses in prime wa-

terfront locations are in jeopardy today.

"If this new period of increased landfalling storms is now with us, it could pose serious threats to safety and to property for the country," Gray said.

The reasons for the renewed activity involve several "climate signals" that have been reliable indicators in the past, he said, including above average sea temperatures in the North Atlantic and above average

with wind speeds that exceeded 110 mph, or ranked as Categories 3, 4 or 5 on the Saffir-Simpson scale. During the past five seasons, there have been 20 such storms, a fourfold increase.

Gray's is the kind of forecast that sends Rumble, special projects coordinator for the Village of Miami Shores, into early denial. "Those long-term predictions, I always take them with a grain of salt," he said, mindful of the glancing blow by Hur-

ricane Irene in October that still left his crews with 350 additional loads of debris to clean up.

Five of those hurricanes were major. At the National Hurricane Center here, allies applaud Gray's accuracy this season, and feel relief that a trying period is almost over.

"We put in a lot of overtime," said hurricane specialist Jack Beven. "The season did have some meteorological quirks."

It began with tropical storm Arlene in June, which formed in an unusual position for so early in the season southeast of Bermuda, and ended with Lennie in mid-November, which made an eastward track through the Caribbean that had not been seen in a storm so late in the season since record-keeping began in 1886, Beven said. Floyd was the strongest, maxing out at 155 mph when it was east of the Bahamas, and later spawned the largest mass evacuation in U.S. history as it raked the East Coast. Flooding brought by its heavy rains produced the costliest disaster in North Carolina history, estimated at more than \$2 billion.

The earlier Dennis menaced the Outer Banks of North Carolina for days as it dawdled off the coast, refusing to disappear out to sea. Its torrential rains set the stage for Floyd's flooding. And Bret in August, powering ashore at 150 mph, was the strongest to make landfall in the United States this year; its destination, mercifully, being a big cattle pasture.

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-William Gray, one of the country's prominent hurricane forecasters

rainfall in Africa. For the past two busy seasons, the presence of *La Nina*, the mass of cold water in the eastern equatorial Pacific, has kept at bay the wind shear that helps to weaken strong hurricanes.

As evidence that this new era could already be underway, Gray pointed out that during the five-year period from 1990 to 1994, there were only five major storms in the Atlantic and Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico

with eight qualifying as hurricanes.

But no one can fault Gray's degree of accuracy, at least not in this season winding up. Earlier this year, he predicted there would be 14 named storms in 1999, nine of them hurricanes. Four of those hurricanes would be intense, he predicted.

The final count: 12 named storms, with eight qualifying as hurricanes.

### TEXAS A&M TRAGEDY



KPT PHOTO BY RON JENKINS

Texas A&M senior Lori Brady takes a moment to mourn near the fallen bonfire in College Station, Texas.

## 150 dead, 100 missing in China ferry fire

Tribune News Services

BEIJING — At least 150 people are dead and more than 100 are missing after a ferry in stormy seas burned and broke apart off China's northeastern coast, official news media reported Friday. Reports said 36 survivors had been found from the ship. One account said the vessel had been carrying 312 passengers and crew members. A second report put the number aboard at 336.

Sixteen-foot waves and freezing temperatures hampered the rescue effort near the port city of Yantai, in the Shandong province. A helicopter, dozens of ships and thousands of soldiers and residents along the shoreline joined in the search for survivors, which occurred one and one-half miles offshore, the New China news agency said.

The ship, which belonged to the Yanda Ferry Company in Shandong, left Yantai on Wednesday afternoon, Nov. 24, for what is normally a seven-to-eight-hour journey 100 miles north to the city of Dalian. It was forced to turn back because of the extreme conditions, but then around 4:30 p.m. Wednesday, flames were discovered on the second deck, and the ship sent out a distress signal, the news agency said. The wind and waves prevented other ships from immediately approaching.

Some four hours later, apparently engulfed by fire, the ship began drifting. That evening it supposedly started to break up, and at least parts of it sank, according to New China. There were no foreigners on board, the *China Daily* said. A survivor, a 28-year-old man, told the French news

agency Agence France-Press that around 4 p.m. Wednesday, all the passengers rushed to the upper deck because of heavy smoke from below, where some 60 cars were making the trip.

"I decided to jump into the water because the smoke was so strong it was hard to breathe," he said, adding that he and five other men had jumped at once. He lost track of the others and swam for an hour, he said, before reaching the shore. Local officials said many bodies had washed ashore, along with a few people who were found unconscious but still alive.

State television showed a beach littered with thousands of oranges, apples and other apparent wreckage,

*"I decided to jump into the water because the smoke was so strong it was hard to breathe."*

-an unnamed survivor

including what appeared to be at least three life rafts. According to local news media, this was the second accident in five weeks for a vessel operated by Yanda Ferry Co. In October, a ship caught fire and sank near Dalian, but all but three people were rescued.

## U.N. official urges Mexican troop withdrawal in Chiapas

by Chris Kraul  
Los Angeles Times

MEXICO CITY — Applying moral suasion in an effort to ease what she described as abuses of indigenous peoples in Chiapas, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson on Saturday urged Mexico to significantly reduce its troop presence in the troubled state.

Robinson said the "heavy" presence of Mexican troops in Chiapas is causing rights abuses at a "grass-roots level." Among the abuses she noted were disappearances, detentions, torture and violence against women. Some of the acts appear to have "official indulgence," she said.

"Victims feel [like] hostages to the situation when they suffer a violation because they do not feel they can get justice," said Robinson, who was on the last leg of a Mexican tour that included a two-day trip to Chiapas and a stop in Tijuana.

Although Robinson declined to say how many of the estimated 25,000 Mexican troops in Chiapas should be removed, she said their presence is "very oppressive in certain areas, especially indigenous communities." Robinson

said she was "overwhelmed" by the documentation of the abuses, and had to buy two new suitcases to pack it all.

Emilio Rabasa, President Ernesto Zedillo's handpicked coordinator for the Chiapas problem, said Saturday that the Mexican government would not rule out a possible troop withdrawal, but that it would have to come as a result of a dialogue with groups there, including Zapatista rebels.

Speaking to reporters Saturday, Rabasa said a great portion of the Chiapas population is anti-Zapatista and wants the army's protection. "The army offers security to the population without discrimination," he said.

Invited by the Mexican government, Robinson met Wednesday, Nov. 24, with Zedillo. Although Mexico has always been sensitive to outside interference on Chiapas, Zedillo signed a "technical agreement" by which Mexico will accept U.N. advice on ways to curb human rights violations. The form the advice will take is still unclear.

Without referring specifically to Chiapas, Zedillo told a national convention of judges meeting here Friday that "without ambiguity," Mexico recognizes that "material deficiencies" exist in human rights and

that the "impunity" of those who violate them is unacceptable.

Zedillo said human rights violations were the result of "the discre-

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-Mary Robinson, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights

tional use of the organs of prosecution, of the stubbornness of wrong attitudes that undermine the rights and dignity of the people."

Acknowledging progress by the Mexican government in addressing human rights issues, Robinson nevertheless said there is a large gap between goals and accomplishments.

The former president of Ireland said she felt compelled to "speak out about the level of violations, of cases

## Supreme Court takes up whether FDA can regulate nicotine as a drug

by Gail Gibson  
Night-Ridder Newspapers  
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WASHINGTON — David Kessler never expected an easy fight when, as head of the Food and Drug Administration in 1996, he proposed that his agency regulate tobacco products as a drug. Cigarette-makers launched a full-scale legal battle. An army of tobacco farmers put on pins and caps proclaiming, "Keep FDA off the farm."

"Wherever you went, you got the same answer: You can't do that. They're

too big. That's a fool's errand," Kessler recalled.

But as the legal fight that Kessler's proposal touched off goes to the U.S. Supreme Court this week, health advocates and tobacco executives find themselves on far different terrain from when the case began nearly four years ago.

Much has happened in tobacco politics — from the industry's 1998 settlement of state lawsuits that included a ban on all cigarette billboards to the acknowledgement this summer by Philip Morris on the company's Web site that smoking is addictive and causes lung

cancer and other diseases.

"We are in a very different place," said Kessler, now dean of the Yale University Medical School. "Who would have ever thought that Philip Morris would stand up and say, 'Nicotine is an addictive substance?'"

Still, the tobacco industry is unyielding on the central question before the nation's high court this week: whether the FDA has the power under the 1938 Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act to regulate nicotine as a drug and cigarettes as a drug-delivery device.

Tobacco lawyers say in legal briefs the

agency does not have jurisdiction. They argue that giving the FDA the authority to regulate tobacco as a drug would lead to a total ban on cigarettes — hurting American smokers and the economy, and circumventing the will of Congress.

The companies are not refuting health issues raised by government lawyers. Instead, the case turns on the question of whether Congress ever intended the FDA to regulate cigarettes. In August 1998, a three-judge federal appeals court panel handed the tobacco industry a major victory by rul-

ing that Congress did not. In that 2-1 ruling, the U.S. 4th Circuit Court of Appeals wrote that there was "strong evidence that Congress has reserved for itself the regulation of tobacco products rather than delegating that regulation to the FDA."

The case went to the Supreme Court on an appeal by the Clinton administration. It is the most significant tobacco case before the court since 1992, when, in a 7-2 ruling, the justices said that a federal law requiring warning labels on cigarette packages did not shield the companies from liability lawsuits.

The court, however, also said that law-

suits cannot be based on claims that cigarette advertising failed to warn of the dangers of smoking.

In recent years, health advocates have viewed FDA regulation as the most potent weapon against smoking, which is blamed for 400,000 deaths in America each year. Activists on both sides will be watching closely during oral arguments scheduled before the high court Wednesday. A ruling could come in the spring.

Said Paul Billings, a top lobbyist for the American Lung Association: "This is the big tobacco case. The big one."