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Rain engulfs area, no serious injuries reported

Ramon Bracamontes and Tammy Fonce-Olivas / El Paso Times

Homes collapsed, roads flooded and officials evacuated hundreds of people in the Upper Valley and Northeast as the region wrestled all day Tuesday with a powerful rainstorm that caused thousands of dollars in damage.

Though the storm pounded all parts of El Paso, no serious injuries were reported.

By midafternoon Tuesday, a state of emergency had been declared in the city as hundreds of businesses had closed, the governor had promised to send aid, and Interstate 10 from El Paso to Las Cruces was closed.

Today, officials warn that more rain may hit the area and ask that residents take precautions.

Rain started pelting the city at 3 a.m. Tuesday and continued throughout the day, slowing to a drizzle by the evening. By the end of the day, the storm had dropped 7.5 inches of rain on the West Side and 4.8 inches in the Northeast.

The onslaught from the powerful runoff water caused a gas line to break in the village of Vinton, forcing the entire town of about 2,000 to be evacuated.

Throughout the county, 435 people were at the various Red Cross shelters.

In El Paso, the Emergency Operations Center was activated at noon so city officials could deal with a closed interstate, closed streets, flooding along the Border Highway, the threat of the Rio Grande overflowing and the runoff that rushed down into the city from the Franklin Mountains.

Israel Pineda, manager of Tire Connections on the West Side near Mesa Street and Thunderbird Drive, said he could feel the ground tremble when rainwater started rushing through a nearby drainage ditch.

"It was scary. The power of the water is amazing," Pineda said.

The water in the ditch next to the business was about 10 feet deep and it looked like a raging river. It crumbled a section of the back parking lot of the shopping center in the 6100 block of Mesa, where the Blockbuster Video and Sun Harvest stores had to close.

The water in this area also carried away three Dumpsters, turned a commercial vehicle onto its side and knocked down an electrical pole. Trash containers flowed down the street until they reached the median on Mesa Street.

"It sounded like Niagara Falls, and I'm from New York state so I know what it sounds like," said William Smith, Sun Harvest manager. "It's unbelievable. This is the desert. We are in El Paso and there are 2 inches of water in my store."

In the Kings Hill area near Mesa and Castellano Drive, Kamal Mahmod lost a good part of his home as the runoff from the mountain knocked down a rock wall, which in turn tore down one of his home's walls.

"I was on the computer, then the dog started barking, then the wall came down," he said. "It was something."

For about four hours, federal officials closed the bridges into Mexico but later opened them when there was no danger. Some of the lower-lying neighborhoods, such as Chihuahuita, Buena Vista, Sunland Park and El Paso Country Club, were inaccessible because of torrents of water and 4-foot-deep flooding.

As the day wore on and the rain continued, the concern turned to the Rio Grande, which was expected to breach and had reached its highest point since 1958. There were worries the river would



El Paso police officers and volunteers pushed a small sports car and its female driver out of deep water after the car stalled along Doniphan at Bird in West El Paso Tuesday. Photo gallery: Tuesday's flooding cripples region Photo gallery: Storm creates severe flooding (Rudy Gutierrez / El Paso Times)



A truck belonging to Rafael Delfin of Heaven Sent Florist was toppled onto its side Tuesday by rainwater that flooded into the canal behind the West Side flower shop. The water lifted the truck and dumped it onto its side. The pressure from the water also knocked down several power poles. Photo gallery: Tuesday's flooding cripples region Photo gallery: Storm creates severe flooding (Ruben R. Ramirez / El Paso Times)

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overflow, but it began to lower in the early evening, and that is the reason the city didn't force any evacuations, said East-Central city Rep. José Alejandro Lozano.

Lozano was in charge of the Emergency Operations Center because the Mayor John Cook, County Judge Dolores Briones and City Manager Joyce Wilson were out of town.

"We were five to 10 minutes from ordering an evacuation, but then the river started lowering and is doing its job," Lozano said. "If more rains comes, we are prepared and the river can handle the new water."

Tim Brice, of the National Weather Service, said more rain and thunderstorms were expected today.

"People in the Upper Valley and the Lower Valley need to get away from the river if they can," Brice said.

The city of Socorro set up two emergency shelters, one at Socorro High School, and asked that anyone in Socorro living within a quarter-mile of the river evacuate. National Guard soldiers will be in Socorro today to help with security, officials said.

In Vinton, two major arroyos broke, flooded several streets and caused the entire town to be evacuated, said Vinton Clerk Jessica Garza. At least 30 homes were flooded, some with 4 to 5 feet of water.

West Side resident Steve Power spent part of Tuesday morning trying to keep water out of his house.

"It looks like a war zone, and it (rain) just keeps coming," Power said. "I've lived in this house 20 years and never saw anything like this."

Kamerina and Andres Barreiro, who live on Jim DeGroat Street on El Paso's West Side, spent almost four hours carrying buckets from their back yard to their front yard. Rising waters were flooding the back part of the house.

"We saved our house," Kamerina Barreiro said. "Thank God we had help from my brother, Mario Ruiz, and his girlfriend, Michelle Flores. We filled two of those city trash cans and emptied them I don't how many times. My arms hurt. My back hurts. Everything hurts."

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Red Cross Emergency Shelters

- Judson F. Williams Convention Center, in Downtown.
- Ranchland Middle School, 7650 Yuma.
- Bel Air High School, 731 N. Yarbrough.
- Morehead Middle School, 6725 Confetti.
- Jefferson High School, 4700 Alameda.
- Canutillo Elementary School, 651 Canutillo.
- El Paso High School, 800 E. Schuster.
- Tigua Community Center in Socorro.
- Wellington Chew Senior Center, 4430 Maxwell.
- Ernesto Serna School, 11471 Alameda.

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