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Iowa River Falls, but Misery Isn't Over

By [SUSAN SAULNY](#) and [MONICA DAVEY](#)

CEDAR RAPIDS, [Iowa](#) — As the waters of the Cedar River started to slowly recede in this city overnight, officials in other cities in Iowa were fighting untamed rivers.

Officials in Cedar Rapids said on Saturday morning that the water will probably not recede enough to even begin pumping water out for several days. And it could be weeks before the water goes below flood stage. The record-breaking flood has forced at least 24,000 people from their homes in this city of 120,000.

In Des Moines, about 100 miles to the west, officials ordered the evacuation of more than 250 homes early Saturday morning as the Des Moines River breached a levee in a neighborhood north of the downtown area, according to The Associated Press.

Water was flowing freely through the neighborhood known as Birdland by about 8:30 a.m., according to WHO television in Des Moines. The water moved into the neighborhood quickly, with city streets that 30 minutes earlier had been dry becoming inundated.

The initial levee break occurred about 3:15 a.m., the Des Moines public works director, Bill Stowe, said in a news conference. City workers, assisted by workers from Polk County and the National Guard immediately went to work to put a secondary sand berm in place. That levee failed about 7:45 a.m. The economic costs of the devastating floods were also beginning to seep in: tourism officials, who depend on the short summers, were bracing for washed-out seasons; farmers in many states stared out at ponds that had once been their fields of beans and corn; and officials were preparing to shut down 315 miles of the Mississippi River, a crucial route for millions of tons of coal, grains and steel.

By now, one prospect — a notion no one wants to ponder but is impossible to avoid — has begun to emerge in Iowa, as well as in Indiana, Minnesota and Illinois: the possibility that this summer might prove to be something like 1993, when the torment of flooding resulted in widespread personal misery and loss, as well as economic cost of \$20 billion.

“Right now, we can't see anything as devastating as 1993 along the Mississippi, but we're gearing up,” said Ron Fournier, a spokesman for the [Army Corps of Engineers'](#) district in the central Midwest, which just ordered three million more sandbags, 25 large pumps and a vast array of extra supplies.

“The hard part is as simple as not knowing how much rain we'll get,” Mr. Fournier said. “Beyond what we saw 24 hours ago, and what we predict in the next 24 hours, we just don't know what's coming. We want the rain to stop.”

In this eastern Iowa city of more than 120,000, the rain had stopped by early Friday morning. In fact, the sun

was out. But as the Cedar River crested at more than 31 feet — far higher than it had been in 1993, when it reached more than 19 feet — residents, rain-weary after several drenching weeks, seemed skeptical of the authorities' suggestion that the worst might be over.

"If there's one more drop of rain, I'll be looking to pack up some stuff," said Fernando Albino, 36, who sat outside his second-floor apartment, staring at the lapping waters just down the block.

Lia Mikesell took her three children on a walk to the water near their apartment building, and reflected back on 1993. "I've never seen anything like this in my life," she said.

Remarkably, officials have reported no flood-related deaths in this city, and only one injury — a twisted ankle. But the effects have been felt all around. Many businesses were closed. A hospital sent its 176 patients, including babies and the elderly, to other facilities. More than 15,000 people had no power. And Cedar Rapids' water shortage remained severe, prompting officials from the chamber of commerce to issue a plea on Friday that businesses suspend heavy water use, lest the city impose mandatory restrictions.

Hotels were asked to stop refilling their pools. Restaurants were asked to use paper plates. Beauty salons were asked to cut back on shampoo.

While the water was expected to recede here, it may take days, perhaps weeks, and that is if it does not rain.

"There are going to be some trying times coming up in the near future," said Brian Fagan, the mayor pro tem of Cedar Rapids, who described in stark terms a boat tour he took of the most heavily flooded areas: churches inundated above their stained glass windows, restaurants with water to the roof. The flooding has caused more than \$700 million in damage here.

Elsewhere, other rivers were still rising, and officials say the worst may be yet to come, perhaps next week. In some parts of the Midwest, more rain was forecast for the weekend, followed by, forecasters say, a period of dryness. Most of Iowa's counties were considered disaster areas, and new troubles were mounting in other states, as shelters opened, government buildings were soaked and sandbags seemed to be everywhere.

The aptness of comparisons to the flooding of 1993 seems to depend on where one lives. In a few towns along some tributaries of the Mississippi River, the recent flooding has already done more damage; elsewhere, along the Mississippi itself, nearly every community from the Iowa-Minnesota border into parts of Missouri is above flood stage, Mr. Fournier said, but not approaching the levels of 15 years ago, when about 50,000 homes in nine states were damaged or destroyed.

So far, weather experts said, the rain had come faster and more intensely in the weeks since late May, but not for as sustained a stretch as it did in June and July 1993. "What would make this like 1993 is if it lasts a little longer," said Michael Palecki, a regional climatologist with the Midwestern Regional Climate Center.

Along the Mississippi on Friday, the Army Corps of Engineers was closing locks that had become inoperable because of high waters, and removing electrical equipment that could be damaged. By Monday, 14 such locks will be closed, Mr. Fournier said, effectively blocking all barge traffic for more than 300 miles between Bellevue, Iowa, and Winfield, Mo.

“The cost of this is easily going to be in the millions here, and that doesn’t even begin to count all the ripple effects of not being able to move things,” said Lynn Muench of the American Waterways Operators, a trade group of tugboat, towboat and barge operators and owners. Some barges already carrying loads may now get stuck en route, she said. Others may choose alternative shipping means or simply wait, she said, losing costly time.

“They are all concerned that 1993 is where we’re heading,” she said of her trade group members. “It was devastating. It basically shut down the river for the whole year. It was a total loss.”

In other areas, the economic fallout was stark. Some cornfields sat under water and wheat fields were smashed by tornadoes and high winds. The delays and troubles have pushed up commodity prices, already high.

“Is there a good time for a flood? No,” said Ernest Goss, an economist at Creighton University in Omaha. “Is there a worse time? Yes, and this is it. This is really going to add to the pinch on the consumer nationwide and to some degree internationally.”

In the Wisconsin Dells, a popular summer tourist region for Chicagoans and others, the Tommy Bartlett Show, a water ski show, reopened on Friday afternoon with jugglers, acrobats and daredevils — but no skiers and no water. Earlier this week, some of the flooding had actually caused the waters in Lake Delton, where the skiers had performed for decades, to cut a new path and vanish, leaving a muddy lake bed.

But even the scaled back show faced new problems as flooding elsewhere had caused major roads to be closed.

In Cedar Rapids — where tourism officials had, long before these events, deemed 2008 “the year of the river” in honor of the Cedar River — dazed-looking families were still trickling into two shelters the Red Cross set up in public schools on Friday evening. At the Prairie High School shelter, two neighbors — Richard Wells, 62, and Richard Branscom, 81 — drank Cokes on a cafeteria bench.

Both men had only their bags of medicine. “We couldn’t get nothing out, just ourselves,” said Mr. Branscom, a retired hotel worker, who was evacuated in a boat after the waters rose to his neck.

Susan Saulny reported from Cedar Rapids, Monica Davey from Chicago and Carla Baranauckas from New York.

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