

GULF COAST HURRICANES

Holmdel team brings supplies to storm-ravaged area

By NIRMAL MITRA
STAFF WRITER

HOLMDEL — Two township officials and a first-aid volunteer were closely watching the progress of Hurricane Rita as they camped out Friday in a motor home in Pass Christian, Miss., after delivering a load of cleaning materials to residents of the hurricane-ravaged community.

"The bulk of the storm is missing us, but we're getting the side effects — rain and warnings of severe weather," said Mike Simpson, the team's leader, in a telephone interview from Pass Christian, which was under a tornado watch Friday.

Simpson, coordinator of the Holmdel Township Emergency Management Office, Detective Eric Hernando of Holmdel police and Nick Rybakowski, a lieutenant with Holmdel Rescue Squad, traveled to Pass Christian after Holmdel decided to "adopt" the tiny coastal community between Biloxi, Miss., and New Orleans.

They drove into town at 9:30 a.m. Friday carrying a trailer filled with supplies donated by

Holmdel residents — including a 9-year-old girl who had walked door to door in her neighborhood, Simpson said. The items included shovels, rakes, tarps, buckets, gloves, brooms, mops and gas-powered chain saws and blowers.

So precious was the cargo that residents emptied the trailer a short time after it reached a distribution plant in the center of town.

"We could have done with 100, maybe 1,000 times what we brought," Simpson said. "They don't have this stuff — they don't have big sweep brooms."

The team hoped to meet Fri-

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day or today with the mayor and police chief and were shooting video of the damage wrought by Hurricane Katrina.

"The destruction is total, absolute," Simpson said. "We went right to the edge of the gulf, on Route 90. Everything inland from there is totally destroyed for miles and miles. There are no words to describe it."

Pass Christian lost its city hall, library, schools, recreation center, a firehouse and about 60 percent of its homes, the Holmdel officials said.

Only 500 people remained in Pass Christian, whose popula-

tion is normally 6,500, Hernando said.

"Very few structures are standing," he said.

Most of the law-enforcement officers and firefighters in town were from "all over the U.S.," he said, noting he saw one vehicle from the Department of Homeland Security and another from Topeka, Kan.

A severe thunderstorm greeted the Holmdel team as it drove into town.

"Power was out last night, and it was back in some parts of town today," Simpson said Friday. "The Federal Emergency Management Agency has stopped delivering ice, and peo-

ple are saying it's very muggy."

The team had camped at a spot close to the Gulf of Mexico.

"The weather is getting pretty hairy," Hernando said Friday afternoon. "There are wind gusts of 60 miles an hour on the beach, the sky is overcast, and the sand is hitting us in the face."

With a high tide and a 6- to 8-foot storm surge expected, local authorities were asking everyone to leave, he said.

Vonage, a broadband phone company that recently moved to Holmdel, rented the team the motor home and paid for all expenses for the trip, including fuel, Simpson said.