



### **Witnesses awestruck by power**

By FRANCES ROBLES, GEOFFREY TOMB and ANDRES VIGLUCCI Herald Staff Writers

A towering tornado ripped its way through the middle of Miami, Biscayne Bay and Miami Beach right after lunch Monday, smashing cars and windows, tossing trees skyward and scaring the dickens out of thousands of people who were transfixed by the uncanny sight.

No one was seriously injured. Damage, although spread across a wide swath, was mostly minor, with some glaring exceptions: The twister peeled the roof off an old stucco apartment house in East Little Havana, leaving a number of families homeless. But for many of those who witnessed its sudden appearance and relentless progress, the tornado was something to marvel at, a rare close look at nature's monumental power.

"I had a funny feeling in my ears, like when the barometer drops during a hurricane," said Robert A. Smith, a science fiction writer who was at home in East Little Havana. "I looked up, and there it was, the sinister-looking black cloud. I stood like a deer in the headlights. I was just staring at it. I couldn't move.

"It was awesome, incredible, like a big giant walking along. It was something of God's that just happened to come down here." Said Metro-Dade bus driver Hugo Louissaint, who spent three harrowing minutes in his rocking, crowded bus on the MacArthur Causeway bridge while the tornado passed overhead: "I could see it over the bridge that goes to the port, but it was coming very close and very fast. I couldn't get away." He spent the time reading his Bible.

Though it seemed unhurried, the funnel's northeastern traverse was in fact rapid, taking about 30 minutes. Preliminary estimates put wind speeds at 73 to 112 mph, the National Weather Service said.

After forming in the Miami neighborhood of Shenandoah at around 1:55 p.m., the tornado pummeled East Little Havana, crossed the Miami River and Interstate 95, where stunned motorists stopped cold to let it pass. It then swirled through downtown, churned sea water into foam in Biscayne Bay, exploded transformers and uprooted trees on Biscayne Island, continued across the water to Arthur Godfrey Road in Miami Beach, where it blew out storefront windows and flipped over a car near Indian Creek. Then it dissipated into, well, thin air.

"It was surreal. You could see the rotation and the debris flying around," said Todd W. Bernstein, in Miami Beach from Philadelphia to visit his sister. "Then it just got sucked up again and disappeared into the clouds."

Before it did, it left a long trail of glass shards, fallen power lines and the strange tableaux typical of a tornado's haphazard destruction.

The tornado tossed a tree through the back windshield of Bernstein's blue Chevrolet Cavalier but spared most other cars parked on the street. Nearby, a yellow newspaper vending box was wedged between a white Chrysler and a parking meter.

#### Widespread effect

It imploded all the windows out of The Citadel, a three-story office building downtown, just south of Miami Arena, yet did not disturb a three-story-high Miami Heat banner hanging from the arena's west facade.

The tornado toppled ancient oaks and ficus trees right and left in Lummus Park, the city's oldest, a park since 1909, and it turned a construction trailer over on its side at the neighboring Park Towers apartments.

It did a fandango on the MacArthur Causeway bridge, freezing traffic in place at the acme, and passing directly over a Metro-Dade bus, but left it unharmed.

Hardest hit was a 24-unit apartment building in East Little Havana that lost its roof, sending its elderly, barefoot tenants scurrying into the street. The building was condemned, leaving 30 people displaced.

One woman was injured when she was struck in the head by flying debris, firefighters said. Other tenants were shaken but otherwise all right.

#### Mayor's presence

Miami Mayor Joe Carollo talked to the tenants, letting them know they'd have a meal and a place to stay for the night.

"We're doing everything we can for you," he said as half a dozen people crowded around him.

One of them was Marta Lopez-Hernandez, who wanted the mayor to understand that her neighbor's roof landed squarely on top of her 1979 Cadillac, the one she uses to shuttle back and forth to her many doctor appointments.

"The car next to mine? Not one little stick fell on it," the 68-year-old woman lamented.

"It all fell on mine. I don't have any money or insurance to buy a new one! I live on disability checks. I just got out of the hospital for cancer surgery, and I need my car to get to the doctor."

Concrete blocks also fell through her neighbor's roof.

Yournet Fumero, 19, was sitting on her couch around the corner from the destroyed building when she caught sight of the twister from her window. No sooner did she get up to take a peek when concrete blocks came flying -- through the ceiling and onto the spot where she had just sat. She was unhurt.

Across town, most injuries were minor -- people shoved by the force of the wind against walls, poles and other objects.

#### On Biscayne Bay

One woman waiting for a Metrobus on Biscayne Island, the closest to the mainland of the Venetian Islands, was slammed to the pavement and rolled around, scraping her arm. Still shaking from the experience, she cleaned up at a nearby condo tower, then got on the next bus, said Linda Zelaya of the building's staff.

Patio furniture from the condo's apartment verandas littered the sidewalk below.

Toll-takers on the Venetian Causeway were in their booths as the tornado swept through just yards away, tearing into trees at a small public park at water's edge. Joe

McCrea, 36, had seen the movie Twister.

“Man, that was garbage. This was the real thing. It was massive. It covered the whole causeway and blocked that 20-story building there so you couldn't see it. I've never seen anything like it in my life,” McCrea said.

“My mother called me to tell me to watch out because there was a tornado watch, and I told her, ‘It just hit here.’ And she screamed, ‘What?’ ”

The tornado's passage initially left some 21,000 people without power, although electricity was being gradually restored. By 9:40 p.m., 9,000 were still without power.

#### Airplane buffeted

It also had some far-flung effects. Just before 4 p.m., turbulence associated with the weather system that produced the twister caused seven injuries on an American Airlines flight to Miami from Boston. Two passengers and five flight attendants were taken to local hospitals.

“There appear to be no broken bones,” spokeswoman Martha Pantin said.

All over town, city leaders and the curious ran out moments after the tornado to assess damage or just gawk. They said it was too soon for dollar estimates.

On Biscayne Island, Miami Police Chief Don Warshaw and Mayor Carollo ran into Florida Lt. Gov. Buddy MacKay, fresh from the morning's meeting of the state board overseeing the city's financial recovery.

“This is the most excitement I've had all day,” said MacKay, who was having lunch at a staffer's nearby house when the tornado struck, dousing the electricity.

For many who had expected the worst, the overwhelming reaction was relief, followed perhaps by a nervous guffaw.

Kent Williams, 37, leasing director at the Miami Center downtown, was having lunch with Metro-Dade Commissioner Pedro Reboledo when he saw the tornado pass and head north.

“Then I realized it was heading right for my house,” said Williams, who lives on Biscayne Island. “I figured I better get home and see if I still had a house and if my dog was alive.”

His wood back fence was gone, but his dog and house were fine.