

# HURRICANE SANDY CLOSES IN ON US EAST

An intensified Hurricane Sandy is roaring upon the US East Coast, threatening major floods and power cuts that could affect 50 million people.

Hundreds of thousands of residents have been ordered to evacuate New York City and New Jersey.

Public transport has been suspended in cities up the eastern seaboard and thousands of flights grounded.

Forecasters fear Sandy will become a super-storm when it collides with cold weather fronts from the west and north.

The category one hurricane has already killed 69 people - 52 of them in Haiti - after sweeping through the Caribbean in the past week.

At the White House, President Barack Obama warned Americans in harm's way to follow emergency instructions.

"When they tell you to evacuate, you need to evacuate. Do not delay. Don't pause," said Mr Obama, who has cancelled campaign events eight days before the US elections.

"Don't question the instructions that are being given, because this is a serious storm and it could potentially have fatal consequences."

The president has signed nine emergency declarations covering New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Maryland and District of Columbia.

The storm threatens an 800-mile (1,290-km) swathe of the US, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes in the Mid-West.

Up to 3ft (91cm) of snow is expected to fall on the Appalachian mountains in West Virginia, Virginia and Kentucky.

At 14:00 EDT (18:00 GMT), Sandy was churning about 170 miles south-east of New York City, the National Hurricane Center (NHC) said.

The storm had strengthened from the morning, packing maximum sustained winds of 90mph with higher gusts.

Hurricane force winds extended for 175 miles and tropical storm force winds for 485 miles, the NHC added.

Authorities said that high tides swelled by a full moon could create storm surges of up 11ft.



The eye of the weather system, which has been dubbed Frankenstorm, is expected to make landfall just south of the New Jersey coast on Monday evening, the NHC said.

Forecasters say the vast hurricane could linger over as many as 12 states for 24-36 hours.

President Obama cancelled a planned rally in Florida with former President Bill Clinton on Monday and an event for Tuesday in Wisconsin, far from the storm.

"I am not worried at this point about the impact on the election," he said at the White House. "The election will take care of itself next week."

His Republican challenger, Mitt Romney, held two rallies as planned in the Mid-West on Tuesday, but cancelled events on Monday evening and Tuesday.

Amtrak has halted passenger train services across the north-east, while some 7,500 flights are cancelled.

With public transport suspended in New York, Washington DC, Baltimore, Philadelphia and Boston, many workers stayed at home on Monday.

Authorities closed the Holland Tunnel under the Hudson River between New York and New Jersey.

Maritime operations at shipping terminals in New York City and New Jersey were also suspended.

As many as 300,000 customers in seven states are without power, CNN reported.

The Hudson and East rivers in New York City have begun overflowing their banks.

Officials warned that flooding in lower Manhattan could inundate the city's underground electric and communications lines and subway system.

Trading on the New York Stock Exchange and Nasdaq was suspended. The United Nations headquarters in New York has also been shut down.

In Manhattan, a giant construction crane has partially collapsed and is dangling atop a 65-storey skyscraper. No injuries were reported.

Chincoteague Island on the Virginia coast was reported to be entirely submerged under water.

Also inundated was most of Atlantic City, New Jersey, where all the city's casinos have been closed.

In Ocean City, Maryland, a tourist pier was severely damaged.

Mass evacuations are under way in low-lying coastal areas from Maryland to Connecticut.

Some 375,000 residents were ordered out of lower Manhattan and other areas of New York. The city has set up shelters for the displaced in scores of schools. Another 50,000 residents were ordered to leave their homes in Delaware and 30,000 in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The Pentagon has activated 1,500 members of the National Guard and made available 140 helicopters for rescue and relief efforts.

At least 14 out of 16 people on board a replica of HMS Bounty - built for the 1962 film Mutiny on the Bounty - had to be rescued earlier off North Carolina after the ship began taking on water.

Two crew members did not make it to life rafts and remain missing.

