

‘Catastrophic ice storm’ slams into Toronto, strands travellers across the province

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Toronto weather creates havoc in city as ice storm leaves 400,000 in the dark across Ontario

A “rare and vigorous” winter storm that coated Eastern Canada in a thick layer of ice over the weekend saw major power outages in Toronto, paralyzing much of the city’s transit system and stranding holiday travellers.

The steady dose of freezing rain Saturday night turned roads and sidewalks into skating rinks Sunday, cut power to hundreds of thousands of people, and played havoc with holiday plans at one of the busiest travel times of the year.

At the peak of the storm’s impact Sunday, hundreds of thousands of households were without power — approximately 300,000 in Toronto alone. By late Sunday night, Toronto Hydro was still working to restore power to 254,000 customers. Southern Ontario, Quebec and the Maritimes saw as much as 30 mm of ice blanket roads and trees, sending broken branches into power lines.

“It truly is a catastrophic ice storm that we have had here, probably one of the worst we’ve ever had,” Toronto Hydro CEO Anthony Haines said Sunday. The worst hit parts of Toronto are the neighbourhoods near the 401, stretching the city from Etobicoke to Scarborough.

In a press conference Sunday, Mayor Ford also said the storm was among the worst in Toronto history, but stopped short of calling for a state of emergency.

“If it gets really bad in the next 24 hours, we could have a state of emergency,” he said at a news conference. Mayor Ford also urged residents to keep children and pets inside and to check on elderly and vulnerable neighbours.

“My house is freezing cold, I have little kids, we might have to go to a hotel tonight, I’m not quite sure what we’re going to do,” Mr. Ford said.

“It’s not good to wake up and have a freezing cold shower.”

Hydro One, which serves much of rural Ontario, was reporting more than 130,000 customers were affected as of late Sunday night. Overall, power outages affected about 400,000 customers in Ontario, as ice-coated tree branches snapped and brought down power lines.

“Thoughts are with those without power due to the ice storm,” Prime Minister Stephen Harper tweeted. “Please stay safe.”

The weather conditions were suspected to have played a role in four fatal highway crashes in Quebec and another in Ontario on the weekend.

Provincial police are strongly advising people not to drive unless it’s absolutely necessary.

“Driving conditions are hazardous. This is made worse by the fact that many traffic lights aren’t working. Please do not drive unless it is absolutely necessary,” Toronto police said in a statement.

In a statement released late Sunday, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne reported reaching out to mayors of affected cities across the province, from Kitchener to Kingston, where residents were photographed skating down residential streets.

“We’re going to bring in the resources that are needed to deal with the situation,” she told a news conference.

But the premier did not report speaking with Mayor Rob Ford — even though Toronto was one of the hardest hit areas, where felled trees and ice-caused mass blackouts that were expected to last as long as 72 hours, or until Christmas Day.

Ms. Wynne instead spoke with deputy mayor Norm Kelly, who would take control of operations should the city declare a state of emergency — a product of last month’s controversial city council move to strip the embattled Mayor Ford of much of his powers.

At least one municipality, the township of Woolwich near Waterloo, declared a state of emergency Sunday night because the power was expected to be out for 24 hours.

On Sunday Environment Canada warned that wind gusts up to 50 km/hour could cause more damage and power outages across the region. Two Toronto hospitals, Sunnybrook and East General, were without power and running on backup generators.

TTC streetcar service was suspended due to “icy power lines,” throughout the day Sunday, but spokesman Brad Ross tweeted that crews were beginning to restore service on streetcar lines late in the evening. Subway service between Bloor and Eglinton stations was suspended for much of the day, as was service on the Scarborough RT and Sheppard lines.

Days before Christmas, the storm left rail and air travellers either stranded or facing significant delays. VIA Rail warned Sunday that passengers travelling between Toronto and Ottawa or Montreal would face setbacks. Travellers were stranded in airports across Eastern Canada, from Southern Ontario to St. John’s, N.L. as the weather conditions resulted in scores of flight cancellations and delays at airports in Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Fredericton, Saint John, N.B., Halifax and St. John’s, N.L.

Passengers are being advised to check their flights before heading to the airport. More than 205 flights were [cancelled at Toronto’s Pearson Airport Sunday, about 27% of all flights](#). Most flights are delayed and many are cancelled at the Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport.

“I’ve got a little boy. He wants me home, so I need to get home,” said Bradley Russell at Pearson International Airport., who had been due to fly home Sunday to his wife and four-year-old son in Gander, N.L.

“God knows, if weather comes in again, we might not get home probably until the new year.”

Pearson Airport alone saw around 107,000 travellers on Sunday, among the highest passenger traffic of the year — second only to 115,000 passengers on Friday. Amid the chaos, the airport saw dozens of flights cancelled with many others delayed.

Airport spokesperson Shereen Daghstani said delayed arrivals had caused a backlog of planes in need of de-icing, which contributed to the rash of longer wait times for passengers.

“Safety is at the top of our objectives,” she said.

The Toronto District School Board said late Sunday that its facilities would be closed Monday. Classes are over for the Christmas break, but there are 300 child care centres that would be affected.

The major weekend ice storm — which Environment Canada predicted would persist in the Atlantic coast until late Monday — drew comparisons to an infamous 1998 ice storm that killed two dozen people and left three million without power for four days in regions across Eastern Ontario, Quebec and the Maritimes.

“Some of the crews I’ve spoken to said this is as bad,” said Blair Peberdy, vice-president of Toronto Hydro.

“These storms tend to wreak havoc and we have to go street by street with chainsaws.”

But the 1998 storm saw more than double the precipitation and required thousands of Canadian Forces troops to mitigate the damage.

Environment Canada Meteorologist Marie-Eve Giguere maintained that the weekend storm was still a “rare and vigorous” weather system, caused by a “sandwich” of cold and warm air. A warm front from the U.S. — where parts of New York state and Pennsylvania saw temperatures reach a balmy 18 C — pushed into a cold air mass in Eastern Canada. The warm air became “sandwiched” in between two layers of cold air, causing the storm to begin as snow, then melt into rain in the warm air before reaching the surface.

By the time the droplets reached the second layer of cold air at ground-level, Ms. Giguere said, the precipitation had become “super-cooled water,” which freezes instantly upon contact with any surface — clinging to tree branches.

“These are really rare storms,” she said.

At the height of the storm, Hydro Quebec said 51,000 customers were without power, mainly in the Estrie and Monteregie regions, while some 1,500 customers in Montreal found themselves in the dark.

Sherbrooke, located in the Eastern Townships, one of the hardest hit parts of the province, suspended all public transportation services.

By late Sunday, the storm had mostly moved out of Ontario and was hitting the Atlantic provinces with freezing rain reported in Fredericton and snow in Charlottetown. Freezing rain warnings were out for parts of Atlantic Canada.

Rob Kuhn, a forecaster with Environment Canada, said many Maritimers would see a replay of what hit parts of Ontario and Quebec.

“There could be quite an extended period of freezing rain right through Monday,” Kuhn said in an interview Sunday.

Kuhn said because temperatures were expected to remain below freezing in the wake of the storm, there would be little melting of the ice caked on tree branches. Coupled with brisk winds the chances of branches following on to powerlines was likely to continue.

“If you’ve got already got compromised trees, expect to see problems, limbs still coming down under the weight of ice,” Kuhn said.

“We’ll be feeling the impacts of this storm for several days.”

The entire province of New Brunswick remained under a weather warning on Sunday afternoon, with heavy snow forecast for the north and freezing rain in the south. NB Power reported nearly 3,000 customers without electricity, mostly in St. Stephen, N.B.

New Brunswick is blanketed in weather warnings, with up to 25 centimetres of snow expected in northern parts of the province by Monday.

Environment Canada says the trough of low pressure will bring a mixed bag of precipitation — snow, freezing rain and rain — to central New Brunswick.

Meteorologist Andy Firth says periods of freezing rain will persist across mainland Nova Scotia into Sunday evening, while rain is expected along the Atlantic coast and in southwestern regions of the province.

Firth says Prince Edward Island could see up to 25 centimetres of snow by Monday.

Dozens of flights at airports across the Maritimes have been delayed or cancelled on one of the busiest travel weekends of the year.

Salting and sanding crews worked through the night in an uphill battle against a dangerous mix of snow, ice pellets and freezing rain that stretches from Niagara Falls, Ont., to the Atlantic Coast.

In Toronto, city officials advised residents to open taps “at the lowest point” to ensure pipes do not freeze.

On Sunday, the city kept community centres open 24 hours to give residents without power an opportunity to stay warm, rest and access to food and water. The city’s giant Yorkdale Shopping Centre also lost power for a period Sunday.

Matthew Shields spent Saturday night in Toronto after his flight from Saint John, N.B., to his mother’s home in London, Ont., was cancelled. Facing a 30-hour delay, he was instead trying Sunday to find a flight to Sarnia, Ont.

“The past two Christmases I elected to not travel, and in hindsight that was probably a good decision,” Shields said.

“We can’t control the weather. There’s a lot of people trying to get to a lot of places.”

The storm appeared to fall well short of the havoc wreaked 16 years ago, when more than two dozen people died.

At one point in January 1998, almost 10 per cent of the country’s population — about three million people — were without power when four days of intermittent freezing rain entombed parts of eastern Ontario, New Brunswick and western Quebec.

The 2013 ice storm is probably the worst since 98, but the two don’t compare, Kuhn said.

”The one from 98, the freezing rain amounts and ice secretion that I recall were 5 to 10 centimetres, so much more than what this one is.”