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Discovery of 2 bodies raises region's death toll to 35

Officials still looking for those lost in the storm

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BILLY SMITH II CHRONICLE

City of Port Arthur policeman Mark Holmes rests with his dog Jack as they search through debris near Anahuac. Law enforcement is continuing the difficult task of looking for Hurricane Ike victims.

Law enforcement officers, accompanied by volunteers' search dogs, continued their long, sweaty march along the marshes of Chambers County Saturday, looking for the remains of Hurricane Ike victims.

They targeted some 44 "debris piles" that have been mapped and marked for searchers. The piles contain a maze of broken homes from here and others swept up from the Bolivar Peninsula



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during Hurricane Ike's Sept. 13 landfall in Galveston.

While no remains were recovered here Saturday, Texas Task Force One crew members scouring debris piles in Galveston County found two bodies on Goat Island, said Galveston County Sheriff's Office Maj. Ray Tuttoilmondo. That raises the hurricane's Houston-area death toll to 35.

Tuttoilmondo said identities of the bodies would be determined by the Galveston County Medical Examiner's Office.

Searching the debris piles is an arduous task, considering their sheer size. Even the term "debris pile" fails to convey their enormity. Broken wooden planks are everywhere, exposed nails making the search even more tedious under the sun.

In one particular pile, shattered wood lines the mushy ground in Chambers County. There's a roof, boats, hot water heaters, shower walls and a few sailboards strewn against rows of Chinese tallow tree trunks and branches.

"This is Bolivar," says Port Arthur Detective Mark Holmes, his hands outstretched to the pile that measures about a half-mile square.

Dangerous territory

His cadaver dog, a black Labrador named Jack,

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runs through it in sections at Holmes' direction. Jack sniffs through boats, broken boards, garden benches, patio chairs and water heaters half submerged in the mushy ground, then moves onto another section still looking for the human scents he is trained to find.

"You know the one thing you don't see?" Holmes asks, as he navigates the planks, careful of the nails and keeping an eye out for snakes, particularly water moccasins. "Clothes. And pictures."

The ground they stand on feels like layers of sponge. It's deceptive.

Chambers County Sheriff Joe LaRive warned searchers of the dangers the piles posed as they gathered in Anahuac. LaRive's chief deputy, Mike Wheat, broke his ankle Friday when his foot sunk in the heaps of grass, shrubs and miles of planks from houses destroyed by Ike.

Among the 20 searchers Saturday were workers from the Chambers County Sheriff's Office, Texas Task Force 1, game wardens from Texas Parks and Wildlife, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, as well as the volunteer organization, Greater Houston Search Dogs, which trains dogs to find humans, both dead and alive.

Aki Yamaguchi, a volunteer with Greater Houston Search Dogs from Katy, brought two of her own cadaver dogs: Jazzy, a border collie, and yellow Labrador named Cooper. Teaming up with fellow search dog volunteer Diane Morrow, the two split the pile with Holmes. The women go to the left, Jack and Holmes go to the right.

"They can work all day," said Yamaguchi, who works as a graphic artist for Katy Independent School District. Like all three of the dog handlers, Yamaguchi carries bottled water for the dogs.

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A personal job

The three search the same debris pile where a U. S. Fish and Wildlife maintenance worker found the decomposed body of Gail Ettinger, 58, of Gilchrist, some 10 days after Ike slammed into Texas.

"You never know what you might find," Yamaguchi said, her voice trailing off as she continues the thought that comes out almost as a question. "Live people ... "

But she is the most hopeful of the crew.

Most of the searchers, many of them here on their own time, hope only to ease the broken heart of a relative.

"When it comes down to it, someone has family who wants to say goodbye," Holmes said. "It's got to be terrible for a parent or a relative to not know."

Holmes, who has been in Chambers and Bolivar almost every day since the storm hit, is volunteering his time. Like many officers, he is not on the clock for this type of work, it is worth it if he and others can help ease someone's pain.

There have been bright spots. About eight days after the storm, he and other officers found an elderly couple alive in a house near Smith Point. They were shaken, but alive.

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Yamaguchi said she's ready to search for as long as people still want them to.

"This is our town. This is our city," she said. "This is really personal."

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