MIAMI _ The refrain "here we go again" echoed Thursday from Key West to Pensacola as an intense Hurricane Dennis edged relentlessly closer to the state, provoking mass evacuations of the Florida Keys and concern along the Gulf Coast.

Still centered in the Caribbean, the major Category 3 hurricane swept Haiti and Jamaica with torrential rain and damaging wind. Warnings blanketed Cuba, where the forecast carried Dennis' powerful core diagonally through the island and close to Havana on Friday night.

Forecasters predicted deteriorating conditions in South Florida on Friday as Dennis' outer bands swing within reach. Gusty winds could exceed the 39-mph tropical storm threshold, 3 to 7 inches of rain could fall this weekend and Dennis could spawn tornadoes.

Hurricane warnings and watches were issued for the Keys, a tropical storm watch covered Miami-Dade County, and a flood watch could be imposed on much of South Florida.

"This is a very dangerous hurricane and people in the warning areas must listen very carefully to the advice of emergency managers," said Max Mayfield, director of the National Hurricane Center in West Miami-Dade County.

More than 50,000 residents and tourists were affected by the evacuation orders in the Keys. Vehicles of every kind crowded U.S. 1, the only exit route. Desperate passengers booked virtually every seat on flights out of Key West.
Within the space of a few hours, life in paradise turned upside down.

Lines of cars snaked around gas pumps. Supermarket aisles were jammed, with no available carts in sight. Contractors toiling on tony vacation homes hastily applied boards and shutters.

"We just got here," Geniene Hernandez of Orlando complained as her husband loaded bags into a rented Lincoln. Newly arrived on the island, the couple had just enough time to tour the island, stop at Sloppy Joe's and be ordered to scoot.

"We are over hurricanes," Hernandez said. "We had like three last year" in the Orlando area.

No one has forgotten that the state was hit by four hurricanes last season, and the drill certainly seemed familiar.

Gov. Jeb Bush cut short his vacation in Maine and declared a state of emergency. The state suspended tolls on the northbound segment of Florida's Turnpike from Homestead to the Broward County line and on westbound Alligator Alley/1-75.

Miami-Dade Manager George Burgess considered evacuations of people with special needs and those living in mobile homes. Emergency managers in Broward coordinated plans with state officials and urged residents to stay informed and prepared.

"All Broward residents should have their hurricane kits ready and should be thinking about what their plan will be if we get severe weather," said Carl Fowler, spokesman for Broward's emergency management office.

The Florida National Guard mustered for action. Water control managers worried about floods, noting that much of the state already was saturated by heavy summer rain. Power utilities prepared for widespread outages.

"This will be a whole statewide problem," said state meteorologist Ben Nelson.
It could be a particular problem for the Pensacola area, targeted as Dennis' likely point of landfall Sunday. That region still has not recovered from the savage beating it took last September from Ivan.

"The town's not even put back together yet, and it's like, 'Here we go again,'" said Amar Brazwell, 65, of Pensacola.

He said his neighbors seem to be preparing themselves earlier and with greater purpose than in the past. "Ivan educated them," he said. "The hard way and extensively."

Craig Fugate, the state's emergency management director, said he wasn't hearing "a lot of optimistic assumptions" that Florida could avoid a strike.

That hope dimmed through the day, as Dennis kept slipping off the predicted track. Meteorologists said it appeared that a high pressure system that had been nudging Dennis to the west _ and away from the Keys and peninsula _ was eroding faster than expected.

The storm’s core still was expected to remain offshore in the Gulf of Mexico as it headed toward Pensacola or elsewhere along the upper Gulf Coast, but its northward wobbles carried the projected path considerably closer to the Keys and the mainland.

One slightly encouraging development: The new path would take Dennis over mountainous areas of Cuba, which could sap it of some strength.

One distinctly discouraging development: The forecast had Dennis maintaining its status as a major hurricane.

As a result, regional water managers were in watch-and-wait mode, with a little wishing thrown in.
After a month of heavy rains, coastal drainage structures have been open and pumping for weeks, trying to drop levels in Lake Okeechobee and water conservation areas fringing the urban East Coast — but Lake Okeechobee continues to rise.

In the Keys, officials ordered a mandatory evacuation of mobile home residents, visitors and other nonresidents throughout the 107-mile chain. Residents were ordered to leave Key West and the Lower Keys.

All travel trailers and recreational vehicles must leave. County and state parks were ordered closed, schools were closed and tolls were lifted on the Card Sound Bridge.

"It snuck right up on us and people are just beginning to prepare," said Key West Mayor Jimmy Weekley. "I would really hate to see the storm come any further east and have a direct hit. I would hope that it goes west."

Evacuations of the lower Florida Keys accompany news that Dennis is a Category 4.

The news for storm-weary Florida residents got worse Thursday: Not only did Hurricane Dennis grow stronger, its projected path moved closer to the Florida peninsula.

Mandatory evacuations of the lower Florida Keys were ordered as Dennis developed into a Category 4 storm, with sustained winds in excess of 131 mph.
The storm rumbled past Jamaica on Thursday at about 15 mph. Ten-foot waves lashed the island's shores, flooding low-lying areas. Winds as fast as 115 mph tore off roofs and toppled trees.

Dennis will cross central Cuba today, forecasters predicted, then bear down on the western Florida Keys. Thereafter, the storm is expected to travel northwest through the Gulf of Mexico and make landfall Sunday somewhere between Louisiana and the Florida Panhandle.

On its current course, Dennis would be about 125 miles west of Clearwater by Saturday afternoon, forecasters predicted. The storm will deliver heavy rain, strong winds and 2 to 3 feet of storm surge to the Tampa Bay area, according to the National Weather Service.

Gov. Jeb Bush declared a statewide state of emergency on Thursday afternoon, and county emergency management centers were gearing up.

"Reality in Florida: We have a hurricane problem," said state Emergency Management director Craig Fugate. "If you didn't know it from last year and you haven't got it from these four tropical storms, I don't know what it's going to take."

A large high pressure system influencing the storm's path shifted to the east on Thursday. That caused most of the computer models to move the storm's projected path closer to Florida. Hurricane investigators also found an expanded wind field on the storm's northeast side, significantly increasing the chance for damage in Florida, said state meteorologist Ben Nelson.

Dennis could lose some steam as it crawls across Cuba but likely will regain it quickly in the warm waters of the southern Gulf of Mexico.

Nelson warned Florida residents not to focus on the skinny black line that represents Dennis' path. The path could shift several more times in the next few days.
"It's going to be a very large storm like Ivan," Nelson said. "The outer rain bands will be affecting the peninsula, and as we saw with Ivan, we could very well have tornadoes here in these rain bands, beginning Friday night."

Central Florida is already waterlogged from heavy rains in June. The Myakka and Peace rivers are at or near flood stage. Heavy rains will swell the rivers further, causing more flooding.

If Dennis remains on its current course, Tampa Bay area residents could begin feeling the effects late Friday or early Saturday. Sustained winds could reach 20 to 30 mph, with gusts above 40 mph, the weather service predicted.

Coastal waters will be very rough. Two or 3 feet of storm surge along the coast could flood some low-lying areas, especially if the surge peaks at high tide.

The National Weather Service has issued a flood watch for local counties for Saturday and Sunday, said meteorologist Jennifer Colson. She urged residents to have a plan if Dennis moves closer to the Florida peninsula.

"Have an evacuation route thought out," she said. "Have it in your head what you are going to do so it's not panic mode it if happens."

The Pinellas County Commission is scheduled to meet in an emergency session today at 3 p.m. The board is likely to grant chairman John Morroni authority to issue an evacuation order during the weekend should the storm come toward the Tampa Bay area.

In Charlotte County, where Hurricane Charley landed so violently last August, cars filled the parking lots at Home Depot and Wal-Mart on Thursday, and customers filled plastic gas tanks at local stations.

These were the worriers, the ones who shudder at the thought of another hurricane, and Charlotte County is full of them. But it also is home to people who learned last year that worrying about an approaching storm does little good.
"If it's going to happen, it's going to happen," said James Smith, 26, who lost his home to Charley. "No one can control the weather."

In the Florida Keys, streams of cars were driving northeast off the island chain.

Last year, the Keys were evacuated three times, though none of those hurricanes hit the island chain. The Keys lost at least $50-million in visitor-related sales last year, according to state estimates. The last major hurricane struck Key West in 1948.

"Just the mere threat will keep people away," said Chris Mullins, chief executive officer of Key West's famous Sloppy Joe's bar. "We've been through this before, so we have game plans."

Times Staff Writer Will Van Zant and the Associated Press contributed to this report. Graham Brink can be reached at (727) 893-8406 or brink@sptimes.com.

FLORIDA PREPARES

Gov. Jeb Bush declared a state of emergency for all of Florida.

All residents of the lower Keys, from the Seven Mile Bridge south, and all visitors and mobile home residents throughout the Keys were ordered to evacuate.

Recent thunderstorms combined with expected heavy rain from Dennis prompted concerns about flooding along the west coast. Flood conditions already exist along the Peace and Myakka rivers.

Health insurance companies and HMOs, under order from the state insurance regulator, suspended restrictions on prescription refills through July 31.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency identified Jacksonville and Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Ala., as staging sites for relief supplies.
Officials said Florida had an ample gasoline supply, though Panhandle residents were urged to use fuel sparingly.

The **Florida National Guard** began identifying units for poststorm assistance.

Consumer hotlines for suspected price gouging were activated: 1-800-HELPFLA (1-800-435-7352) or 1-866-9-NO-SCAM (1-866-966-7226).

In Escambia and Santa Rosa counties, 7,600 Gulf Power customers were without power Thursday after Tropical Storm Cindy hit the western Panhandle area with 30 mph winds Wednesday night.

The remnants of Tropical Storm Cindy dumped up to 4 inches of rain in the mountains of western North and South Carolina. Two people died in Georgia, where Cindy dropped up to 5 inches of rain. A suspected tornado with winds of 113 to 157 mph touched down south of Atlanta, causing damage estimated at $25-million to $40-million.