

## Haiti's Storm-Tossed Brace for New Season

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GONAIVES, Haiti -- Tropical Storm Jeanne blew away Markley Maitre's concrete-block house in a rush of wind and water, forcing her to dig through the mud for debris to rebuild.

Now, almost two years later, Maitre, a mother of five, still lives in a skeletal dwelling of scrap metal and sticks that won't provide much shelter when the next powerful storm strikes Haiti.

"If we have another storm, I think we're all going to die," she said outside her home in Gonaives, a seaside city of dirt streets and open sewers in a region left vulnerable to storms by decades of deforestation.

Jeanne killed about 3,000 people in Gonaives and displaced many more. Today -- with the start of the new hurricane season just days away -- there is still a large fetid lake formed by floodwaters on the city's outskirts and thousands of people crammed into a shantytown that sprang up to house survivors.

The dire situation is not unusual in the poorer corners of Latin America and the Caribbean, where tropical storms and hurricanes often bring death and destruction on a far greater scale than in more-developed areas with evacuation routes, modern communications and better drainage.

Wealthy places like the Cayman Islands or high-profile tourist zones like Cancun, Mexico, have quickly marshaled resources to rebuild after storms in recent years. It's a far different situation in Haiti, where reconstruction has been largely left to a few private aid groups, or Guatemala, where Hurricane Stan last fall brought deadly floods and landslides to remote communities with few resources.

Last year's Atlantic season saw a record 27 tropical storms, which affected more than 4 million people and caused damage of more than \$7 billion in Central America and the Caribbean, according to the U.N.-run Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, or ECLAC.

Forecasters say they expect this season will have fewer named storms than last year but will still be above average.

"We have already started to be on alert," said Evan Thompson, a meteorologist at the national weather service of Jamaica, where Hurricane Ivan wiped out crops, destroyed thousands of homes and killed 17 people in 2004. "Most of our population lives along the coast, and there's not many places you can go to escape the wrath of these systems."

Even with fewer storms, many places in the region could have a devastating season because of inadequate disaster planning and years of environmental mismanagement, said Ricardo Zapata-Marti, a natural disaster specialist with ECLAC.

"The vulnerability has not decreased and the risk has increased," he said, citing Central America as one of the more vulnerable regions.

Stan struck there last October, unleashing deadly flooding and mudslides that killed 700 people in Guatemala and left thousands homeless. The storm also caused havoc in southern Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica.

Six months later, reconstruction is dragging, prompting protests from frustrated storm survivors. In Guatemala, for example, most of the 9,000 families who lost their homes still live in temporary shelters of plastic canvas and tin roofs.

"The Spaniards founded 100 towns in 100 years, now we have to do it in 12 months," said Eduardo Aguirre, the Guatemalan official in charge of reconstruction.

But rebuilding alone isn't always enough. The best solution, Zapata-Marti said, is for those struggling areas to replace their buildings, roads and drainage systems with more-modern infrastructure that can withstand a powerful storm.

In places such as Haiti, the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, that is simply not an option, at least not in the near future.

"We don't even have funds to pay our employees, so how are we supposed to prepare for storms?" said Gonaives Mayor Gartha Jacques, who walks to City Hall because her office doesn't have a budget for a car.

With no aid from the Haitian government, Gonaives has relied on groups such as CARE and the U.S. Agency for International Development to help rebuild parts of the city. But the risk remains for thousands of storm survivors who still live in a muddy, makeshift settlement named Cité Jeanne.

For Maitre, a 32-year-old ice vendor, life only got harder after the storm. With little work, she has not been able to finish rebuilding her one-room home, where sunlight pokes through her roof of discarded tin.

"We'd like to have a strong house made of brick, but no one here has money for that," she said. "When it rains, water comes off of the mountain and inside the house."

Some in the area have begun building second stories atop crumbling concrete-block homes, so that they'll have somewhere to go if the water rises again.

Others say they would like to move farther inland but fear they would lose their livelihoods, many of which depend on the sea.

"We can't afford to leave," said Charite St. Louis, a 55-year-old fisherman who lost everything he owned in Jeanne. "Everyone just has to look out for themselves and pray the next storm doesn't come our way."