

Category 5 Dean bears down on Mexico

The Miami Herald
Aug. 20, 2007

TULUM, Mexico --

Tourists fled the Mayan ruins, shack dwellers in remote areas sought sturdier refuge and oil field workers turned off the spigots Monday night as a savage Hurricane Dean launched its attack on Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula.

A top-rank Category 5 terror, poised to deliver catastrophic damage early today under cover of darkness, Dean menaced a tourist region called the Maya Riviera, the city of Chetumal and one of the world's most crucial oil operations.

Its work was done in Jamaica, where at least two people died, many houses were shattered or flooded or both, and the cleanup was under way.

Now, it was Mexico's turn. Rain arrived around 5 p.m. EDT, the leading edge of genuine trouble.

"We'll take them out by force," Tulum Mayor Jorge Luis Cordoba Pech said of anyone who resists evacuation. Many residents of the coastal town live in tin-and-wood shanties. "We can't let them lose their lives."

At the same time, Mexico's state-run Pemex oil company hurriedly ordered 18,000 workers to abandon offshore oil rigs, suspending production at all 407 wells and drilling operations in the area.

Forecasters said Dean's ferocious core would crash into the Yucatán early today. As the storm approached land, the wind already screamed at 160 mph, four mph above the Category 5 threshold.

In Jamaica, which avoided a direct hit, officials reported extensive -- but apparently not disastrous -- damage, including collapsed houses, destroyed roofs, heavy flooding and impassable roads in many parishes.

The road connecting Kingston to its airport was transformed into a sea of sand, an obstacle course of boulders and downed power lines. The road later was cleared and the airport was expected to reopen today. Montego Bay's airport reopened late Monday.

It could have been much worse in Jamaica.

In addition to the two deaths in that nation, Dean was held responsible for seven others in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, St. Lucia and Dominica. Four people were missing and presumed dead in the Dominican Republic.

"There always seems to be somebody looking out for Jamaica," said Vernon Thompson, 56, who lives in the Caribbean Terrace neighborhood, near Kingston's airport. "No matter how bad things are, we always seem to come out quite well."

For residents of the tiny Cayman Islands, the news was even better Monday:

Dean's vicious eye wall and other hurricane winds bypassed them, veering to the south, though the islands still were subjected to heavy rain, strong gusts and battering 16-foot waves.

Much of the attention Monday, however, turned to Mexico, likely to become Dean's final destination -- and its most punished victim.

Dean was expected to push diagonally across the Yucatán from east to west, roaring over populated areas, ancient Mayan ruins, jungles and the western state of Campeche, with 750,000 residents.

Hurricane warnings were posted on both coasts of the Yucatán and in neighboring Belize.

Among the places most at risk: Chetumal, a bayside city of 125,000 people that sits on the border with Belize, and the towns of Tulum, Punta Allen, Mahahual, Felipe Carrillo Puerto and Los Limones.

Many high-end resorts have been built in that area in recent years to serve visitors to nearby ancient Mayan ruins.

Forecasters warned of five to 10 inches of rain throughout the region, which includes mountainous sections of Guatemala and Honduras, where flash floods and mudslides can threaten lives.

Another ominous prediction: storm-surge flooding of 12 to 18 feet near and to the north of where Dean makes landfall.

As an early precaution, roads leading south from Cancún to that region were closed Monday, with police manning roadblocks.

It looked as though the vacation centers of Cancún and Cozumel would be spared. Nevertheless, 70,000 tourists and 20,000 residents were evacuated from the region.

At Cancún's airport, tourists and residents slept on the floor, hoping to board one of the last flights out.

"It doesn't make us feel good," said Emily Mastalerz of Rhode Island, who traveled to Cancún for her honeymoon but made a premature -- and logistically difficult -- escape Monday. "What are you going to do?"

Farther south, directly in the line of fire, officials evacuated small towns along the Caribbean coast, including Punta Allen, a dangerously exposed fishing village and tourist magnet at the tip of a peninsula about 100 miles south of Cancún.

But the heart of the activity -- and the concern -- was in Chetumal, 200 miles south of Cancún and directly in Dean's path. The city sits next to Belize on Chetumal Bay and is a trading partner with its neighbor.

There, officials dispatched hundreds of police officers and soldiers, including 120 federal police officers from Cancún, to maintain order and conduct post-storm recovery actions.

The storm already delivered a blow to one of Mexico's most important natural resources -- oil. Offshore drilling is the state's most important industry, and Pemex shut it completely Monday.

That will reduce worldwide production by 2.65 million barrels of oil and 2.6 billion cubic feet of natural gas every day.

But analysts, relieved that U.S. facilities would not be affected, said the Bay of Campeche shutdown -- if brief -- likely would not affect U.S. supplies or prices.

In Haiti and the Dominican Republic, earlier victims of the season's first hurricane shouldered the difficult job of cleaning up and patching up. Officials of both countries described the damage as minimal.

Said Yolene Surena, an emergency coordinator for the Haitian government:

"There was more fear than pain."

Resident of the Yucatán could only hope to be so fortunate.

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