

Dean Batters Mexico's Oil Industry

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VERACRUZ, [Mexico](#), Aug. 22 -- Mexico's rich offshore oil platforms came under assault early Wednesday as Hurricane Dean whirled through the Gulf of Campeche after downing trees and dumping heavy rain on the Yucatan Peninsula.

More than a day after the storm struck the Yucatan as a massive Category 5 hurricane, there still have been no deaths reported, but several small cities were bailing out after severe street flooding.

Mexico's state-owned oil company, Petroleos Mexicanos, said early Wednesday that it would not know until later in the day whether its drilling platforms have been damaged. The company evacuated 18,000 workers and shut down production, losing 2.7 million barrels of oil a day and 2.6 billion cubic feet of natural gas.

After missing the most heavily populated areas of the Yucatan, Dean once again headed for lightly populated areas on the mainland. The National Hurricane Center said the center of Dean made landfall near the town of Tecolutla in the state of Veracruz at about 11:30 a.m. CDT. The center said the hurricane was a Category 2 with winds estimated at 100 mph.

Fidel Herrera, governor of Veracruz, said 10,000 people had been evacuated, just a tiny fraction of the third largest Mexican state's 6.9 million inhabitants. Veracruz closed its massive port, one of Mexico's busiest, in advance of the storm, an expected precaution that will cost millions in delayed shipping costs.

The National Hurricane Center said Dean was moving about 20 mph through the gulf and that its once tightly wrapped eye crumbled significantly during its trek across the Yucatan. The eye was re-forming over the gulf waters more slowly than forecasters expected, which could augur well for Veracruz because hurricanes with poorly formed eyes tend to have slower winds and be less destructive.

After reaching wind speeds of 165 mph the day before, Dean's winds tapered off but it headed for shore as a Category 2 hurricane. The outer bands of the storm were dumping heavy rain on the Veracruz coast and seemed headed for an area that can be vulnerable to mud slides.

In Veracruz, waves flooded the strip of beach in the hotel zone where the day before a few hardy tourists sunbathed even as Dean was slipping into the gulf and heading this way. Television camera crews shot archetypal standups of correspondents in yellow rain slickers squinting against the driving rain.

Across the gulf, people were still talking about the small "miracles" that saved the Yucatan from much greater destruction and remembering one incident, in particular, that defines the

storm for residents of the small city of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, which was 30 miles from Dean's core.

In the grim darkness, as 160 mph winds lashed this small city, Angelica Tun Puc lay in pain.

The electricity had long since gone out. Doors were stitched tight. The streets were bare.

But Tun Puc was awake in a powerless hospital in the Yucatan Peninsula, fighting through the labor pains that had begun the night before. The night before Hurricane Dean.

Sometime before 9 a.m. Tuesday, while rain pelted windows secured only by crosses made of tape, Tun Puc gave birth to a tiny, wriggling baby girl, according to her doctor, Basilio Eliseo Ku Euan. Tun Puc showed off her hurricane-day newborn for a small group of reporters and some of the police officers who had rushed her to the hospital after finding her close to giving birth in a remote village.

Exhausted, she could utter only one sentence for her guests as she held her daughter tightly to her chest: "I haven't even thought what I'm going to name her."

Translated literally, the Spanish phrase for giving birth means "to give to the light." And not long after Tun Puc became a mother, the sun appeared for the first time, revealing a city that was far less damaged than expected.

The birth was a small blessing on a day of huge blessings here. The storm that the Mexican news media dubbed El Gigante -- the Giant -- somehow found the one route through the Yucatan Peninsula that would cause the least damage, slipping well south of Cancun's glitzy hotels and dense residential neighborhoods. Trees fell, glass cracked, but there was none of the widespread, catastrophic wreckage that a storm this huge -- the first Category 5 hurricane in 15 years to make landfall in the Atlantic basin -- was capable of causing.

Though Dean killed 12 people during three days in the Caribbean, by late Tuesday -- despite earnest searches by police and soldiers -- not a single death had been recorded in Mexico.

Dean, weakened over land, regained some strength Wednesday as it passed over the Gulf of Campeche and onto Mexico's mainland. The storm is expected to deliver winds in excess of 100 mph somewhere between two of the country's most important port cities: Tampico and Veracruz. It is also expected to pass through Mexico's richest offshore oil fields and could veer close to the aging Laguna Verde nuclear plant. Hundreds of buses have been placed on alert in case there are radiation leaks.

"Here in Veracruz, we're blessed by God," Jorge Ortiz, a retired airline worker, said Tuesday while municipal crews filled sandbags a few steps away. "They always say the storms are going to get us, but we are always safe."

Ortiz was buoyed by reports from the Yucatan, as were his friends and neighbors, who seemed to be doing little to prepare for the oncoming storm. Restaurant workers crowded around television sets watching swirling graphics and cheering.

"It's down to a Category 1!" Gabriel Canales yelled across the floor of his bayside seafood restaurant, El Varadero.

The Yucatan's good fortune seemed to affirm the fierce confidence of Mayan villagers, most of whom had refused to leave their thatched-roof shacks before the storm. Some wielded machetes as they met evacuation crews sent to about 100 villages near Felipe Carrillo Puerto. Many villagers fled to secret caves that according to Mayan lore are immune to hurricanes and floods. Others, said Ligia Arana, a state legislator from Quintana Roo in the eastern Yucatan, declared "that God had designated that they not leave."

"If we're going to die, that is a matter for our God," Arana recalled villagers saying.

Dean made landfall at 4:30 a.m. in Costa Maya, a cruise ship port near Chetumal, a city close to the Belize border that suffered some of the worst street flooding and building damage in the area. Officials at the U.S. National Hurricane Center said the storm registered the third-lowest pressure at landfall -- a measure that indicates the intensity of a storm -- ever recorded in the Atlantic basin, trailing only Hurricane Gilbert in 1988 and an unnamed storm in 1935.

Dean was the first Category 5 storm to make landfall in the Atlantic basin since Andrew, which devastated towns south of Miami in 1992. Andrew caused \$26 billion in damage, equivalent to about \$38 billion now. So far, damage estimates for Dean range from \$750,000 to \$3 billion in the Caribbean. AIR Worldwide, a risk management firm, estimated Tuesday that insured losses in Mexico from Dean are unlikely to exceed \$400 million.

All weekend, Caribbean islands were bracing for cataclysmic direct hits that never came. On Saturday, Jamaica was largely spared by Dean. Then on Sunday, the Cayman Islands escaped a direct blow.

But even a glancing shot from a storm this big can be punishing. The hurricane caused scattered mudslides and destroyed flimsy homes in Jamaica, which was peppered by Dean's strong outer bands. On Tuesday, the country's electoral commission decided to delay the country's hotly contested Aug. 27 general elections until the damage could be assessed.

The threat posed by the storm was enough to send shivers across Mexico. The huge, government-owned oil platforms off the Yucatan's western coast were shut down before Dean's arrival, sapping Mexico of revenue from 2.7 million barrels of oil and 2.6 billion cubic feet of natural gas a day. More than 40,000 tourists fled resorts in Cancun, Playa del Carmen and other Mayan Riviera cities. And President Felipe Calderón cut short a summit in Quebec with President Bush and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper to tour hurricane zones.

While Calderón was planning to find his way to hurricane-tousled parts of Mexico, Bernardino Yan, a laborer trapped by Dean in Felipe Carrillo Puerto, was trying to find his way out.

Unlike some here who suffered less than they expected during Dean, Yan was searching for a ride to his village when he was stranded without transportation as Dean approached.

"What worries me is my children," he said. "I don't know anything about them--my calls don't go through."

Ortiz, the airline retiree, predicted that Calderón would not need to be bothered with Veracruz and the surrounding region, no matter what forecasters said. Ortiz recalled that Stan, a major hurricane that threatened Veracruz with mass destruction in 2005, was taken so lightly by a state official that he joked it should be called Hurricane Satan. Stan spared Veracruz, and, in Ortiz's opinion, so did Satan.