

Readiness pays off as Hurricane Dean passes over Yucatán Peninsula

In Playa del Carmen, curfews and shelters helped residents weather the Category 5 storm.

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Playa del Carmen, Mexico - On his first day of kindergarten, young Eminem Jimenez went to school as planned. But instead of meeting classmates, he spent the night there with 30 other people, hiding from hurricane Dean.

Everyone had enough food and water as well as bedding – the result of careful planning by local officials here. With memories fresh of the destruction of hurricane Wilma, a Category 5 storm that struck in force just two years ago and caused \$3 billion in damage, preparations by the civil-protection agency, the Red Cross, and the Army went into gear well ahead of Dean's arrival. And while the storm was not as forceful as originally anticipated, the advance preparation, as well as communication about taking shelter, helped the city weather the blast, officials say.

"Since the beginning of the year, we've been going around to schools and churches, informing people about hurricanes," says Luis Antonio Morales Ocaña, who works for the municipal civil-protection agency.

According to Mr. Morales, problems arose during Wilma when people became frightened and ran to shelters at the last minute. In addition, local authorities did not foresee the number of people who would need shelter.

This time, the city set up 12 shelters stocked with supplies and hosting a medic. It cleaned the streets of debris to prevent objects from being tossed around by the wind and cleared the drainage system to prevent flooding. Officials also tried to prevent panicked activity before the storm struck at 4 a.m. Tuesday. "People bought food in an orderly way, the stores maintained their normal prices," says Morales, "and businesses agreed to open as soon as possible after the hurricane."

Throughout the stormy night, the governor of Quintana Roo, Félix González Canto, appeared on local television with updates. He called on the people of Quintana Roo to protect themselves and to inform their neighbors, especially those with no access to TV or radio, of the coming storm. A curfew was in effect overnight and was rigidly enforced, unlike during Wilma.

As the Army's 74th Battalion made rounds Tuesday morning, the streets were starting to come to life after a night of heavy sheets of rain and winds that bent palms over. Vegetation

littered the ground, but few trees had fallen and there was little visible structural damage to buildings and homes. No deaths were reported.

On the touristy side of Playa del Carmen, restaurants and boutiques began to open one by one, with about 30 percent in business by midday. Tourists emerged, and if not for the boarded-up windows and littered streets, it might have seemed if no storm had passed through.

Paul, the owner of an art shop on Playa del Carmen's chic 5th Street, expressed relief as he looked at his store. "Wilma was bad because it stayed [over the city] for three days," he said. "There are a few palm huts to repair, but the city's fine. The government was well prepared this time."

Hurricane Dean was the most intense Atlantic storm to make landfall in two decades. But it made landfall along a sparsely populated coastline, well to the south of the major resorts like Playa del Carmen and Cancún, where 50,000 tourists had been evacuated.

Tuesday, it weakened to a Category 1 storm, but was expected to grow back into a powerful hurricane as it headed over the lower Gulf of Mexico, where more than 100 offshore oil platforms were evacuated ahead of the storm.

When Dean first struck land near the cruise port of Majahual, it had sustained winds near 165 m.p.h. There were no immediate reports of deaths, injuries or major damage, Governor Gonzalez told Mexico's Televisa network, though officials had not been able to survey the area.

The eye passed directly over the state capital of Chetumal. In the largely Mayan town of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, about 30 miles north of the eye's westward path, people stared from their porches at broken tree limbs and electrical cables crisscrossing streets flooded with ankle-deep water.

Dean's path takes it directly toward the Cantarell oil field and also veers toward Mexico's only nuclear plant, where a state official said 2,000 buses were brought in to evacuate personnel if necessary.

Dean was expected to hit the central Mexican coast as a major hurricane Wednesday afternoon, about 400 miles south of the Texas border.

Back in Playa del Carmen, hotel manager Oscar XIX expressed relief at the lack of damage and noted the changes in the area in the past decade. "When hurricane Gilbert hit in 1988, people weren't prepared, they didn't know it was coming," he said. "They lived in palm huts because this was a town of fishermen. Very few people live in those conditions these days.

"The relief was well coordinated this time. They were in constant communication with us about the storm. They told us before the storm hit and that gave us plenty of time to secure our homes."

