

Dean's rain reaches Mexico; damage reported in Jamaica

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TULUM, Mexico --

Tourists fled, residents sought shelter and oil field workers turned off the spigots Monday as Hurricane Dean advanced toward Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula.

On the brink of becoming a top-rank Category 5 terror, Dean menaced one of the Yucatan's largest cities, a growing tourist region known as the Maya Riviera and one of the world's most crucial oil operations.

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.

The 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."

Forecasters said Dean's core likely would crash into the Yucatán early Tuesday, with winds as high as 160 mph. As the storm approached that region, its winds already screamed at 155 mph, just 1 mph below the Category 5 threshold.

In Jamaica, meanwhile, officials reported extensive -- but possibly not catastrophic damage -- including collapsed buildings, 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. Later, it was cleared and officials said the airport would reopen Tuesday.

There were no immediate reports of deaths or serious injuries, though communications were severed in many areas. Overall, Dean was held responsible for six deaths in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, St. Lucia and Dominica.

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

Among the villages, towns and cities most at risk: Chetumal, a bayside city of 215,000 people that sits on the border with Belize. Others included Mahahual, Felipe Carrillo Puerto and Los Limones.

Roads leading south to that region from Cancún were closed Monday, with police manning roadblocks.

Hurricane warnings were posted on both coasts of the Yucatán, along the Caribbean where Dean was expected to make landfall and along the Bay of Campeche, where it was expected to exit late Tuesday, still a hurricane.

Warnings also were issued for Belize.

It looked as though the vacation centers of Cancún and Cozumel would be spared. Nevertheless, 70,000 tourists and 20,000 residents were being 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 frustrating -- 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.

Ancient Mayan ruins can be found throughout the area, and many high-end resorts have been built in recent years to serve visitors.

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 strategic 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.

Dean was expected to push across the Yucatán, roaring over jungle, the Mayan ruins and the western state of Campeche, with 750,000 residents.

The storm already delivered a blow to one of Mexico's most important natural resources: oil.

Off-shore 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 experts, 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.

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

Dean's life-threatening 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.

Although there was sporadic flooding and power outages, the storm was pretty much a nonevent for the Caymans, and the all-important financial industry seemed largely unaffected.

Dozens of residents on Grand Cayman, population 53,000, ignored a curfew and risked arrest to get a breath of fresh air as Dean's center passed well to the south. Gov. Stuart Jack urged them to return inside until the storm passed entirely.

"Preliminary reports indicate persons should not take any comfort in the current absence of rain," he said. "Already there is evidence of flooding in low-lying coastal areas, which is creating significant debris buildup in some roadways."

Back in Jamaica, officials released these preliminary reports of damage, cautioning that additional and possibly more troubling reports would emerge later in the day:

- St. Thomas: Extensive damage to roofs. Some collapsed structures. Storm surge flooding. Impassable roads.
- St. James: The community of Coral Gardens "severely affected" by wind damage.
- Kingston and St. Andrew: Severe wind damage and downed power lines in the Riverton city area. A residential building collapsed in the Chambers Lane area of Liganea.
- Clarendon: Flooding from the Denbigh gully.

- Portland: Several roads blocked.

- St. Mary: Roads blocked by fallen trees,

- St. Catherine: Port Henderson road impassable due to storm surge. Roof damage in the communities of Naggo Head and Newland. Road eroded by storm surge in Hellshire. Rising water in Old Harbour forced the evacuation of several people.

On Sunday night, Dean's core -- surrounded by 145-mph winds -- pulsed to within 23 miles of Jamaica's southern shore and then roamed parallel to the coast. The result: Powerful hurricane winds ripped through the island, home of 2.6 million people.

"I am panicky," said Pearlana Barnaby, 45, a mother of four and one of only a few residents who sought shelter inside Jamaica's National Arena. "I panic a lot because of the vibration of the breeze."

The arena trembled. The wind whistled. Barnaby began singing a gospel hymn -- *Hear My Cry Oh Lord*.

Thousands of other Jamaicans ignored pleas to leave their homes and find refuge in sturdy buildings, a decision they might have regretted by early Monday.

Meanwhile, in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, where recovery operations were under way, correspondents for The Miami Herald filed these reports:

- Haiti: Two people died and 16 suffered storm-related injuries, according to local officials.

Authorities said a 34-year-old man died in the western tip of the country when a tree fell on his house. A woman died in the southwestern seaside town of Les Irois, but details of her death were not immediately available.

About 260 houses were destroyed and another 200 were damaged, mostly in the southern and western parts of the impoverished country.

On Monday, officials described the damage as minimal and said most of the 6,000 people who evacuated their homes soon would return.

"There was more fear than pain," said Yolene Surena, an emergency coordinator for the Haitian government.

- Dominican Republic: Dean took one life, left dozens homeless and forced hundreds to seek temporary refuge.

Emergency responders were still assessing damage in the western province of Barahona amid reports that waves had washed away beachside shacks.

Most of the damage was caused by the 16- to 20-foot swells that battered parts of the southern coast. Authorities said at least five homes were destroyed and 15 others damaged.

The single fatality occurred Saturday afternoon when a teenager in the capital of Santo Domingo was swept out to sea as he watched waves smash over a seaside roadway.

And it was not over yet,

The Dominican Republic, much of the rest of the Caribbean and parts of Mexico's Gulf Coast remained on alert.

Hurricane Dean remained potent and on a dangerous path. More destruction and, tragically, more death seemed likely.

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