

Hurricane robs Maya of vital fruit trees

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UH-MAY, Mexico --

Thousands of Mayan Indians lost homes as Hurricane Dean blew through the Yucatan peninsula, but their real wealth was the trees, now scattered and broken in the storm's wake. Village after village is carpeted with fallen mangoes, oranges, guanabanas and nameys that will never be harvested.

Mexico's Mayan communities have survived centuries of oppression, expulsion from valuable land along the Caribbean coast, and many damaging storms. But they say no other hurricane - not Gilbert in 1988, not Roxanne in 1995, not Wilma in 2005 - has hit the Maya so hard.

Dean ripped most of the roof off Israel Cruz Chan's home in the village of Nohbec, not far from where storm's center tore through the jungle on Tuesday. But Cruz Chan, 40, demonstrated the resilience of the Mayan villages of the Yucatan Peninsula.

He surveyed the destruction - all of his furniture, his few appliances, and bedding, soaked and tumbled into the front yard of his cinderblock home. Then he got to work, borrowing a ladder and busily nailing up new sheets of roofing.

"If I just sit and wait until they help me, I'll die waiting," he said. "If I wait, with my hand out, who's going to give me food, and where am I going to cook it? I'd rather start working, first."

Like most people here, Cruz Chan makes a spare living from fishing, construction work and growing fruit in a small orchard.

The Mayan residents - some of the hardest hit by Hurricane Dean - had simple requests for aid: a few sheets of roofing, drinking water, some food to help them get by now that their harvest has been destroyed.

"There isn't even any corn to eat," said Pilar Uitz Tzil, 58, waiting in line under the burning sun for anything the government might hand out. Finally, a few trucks arrived with bottled water and thick blankets, an odd gift in a steamy climate where many sleep in hammocks in the open air, just to get a breeze.

Dean brought heavy rain to central Mexico on Thursday but lost strength and was downgraded to a tropical depression. The death toll stood at 25, mostly in the Caribbean.

In the hours after the storm passed just south of the Mayan village of Uh-May, brigades of villagers could be seen marching through the unpaved streets with machetes and axes to clear a way through the debris.

"We still practice 'faena' here," said Liborio Yeh, 56, referring to the ancient Mayan tradition of doing a few hours of community work each week.

A huge tree fell on the front of Yeh's home, and the electricity cables had been toppled. But generous and welcoming as the Maya usually are, he handed over a big bunch of mamoncillo fruit from the fallen tree to a visiting reporter.

The biggest threat to the Maya may not be the damage to their homes, though their stick huts lay splintered, thatch roofs blown away. It's the natural environment they so heavily depend on - innumerable felled trees from which the Maya extract everything from chewing gum to fruit to hardwood. The dead wood could also spark forest fires when the dry season comes.

"The greatest damage was done to the nature areas, that is what suffered the greatest impact," said Luis Alberto Rivera, the Quintana Roo state public safety director.

The Maya launched one of North America's last Indian revolts in the lower Yucatan Peninsula in 1850 - a bloody rebellion that the Mexican government could not halt until 1901. Even now, suspicions about outsiders run deep - and despite the catastrophic winds Dean packed, some community leaders carrying machetes turned away soldiers trying to evacuate people.

"They didn't want to leave," said Gen. Alfonso Garcia, who ran the shelters in Felipe Carrillo Puerto, which could have held many more people from outlying communities.

As early as Monday, Mexico will begin distributing a total of \$10.3 million in cash grants to people who lost crops, Agriculture Secretary Alberto Cardenas Jimenez said.

"The poorest and smallest are those who we'll most help immediately," he said, explaining that the contingency fund also will be tapped to help large commercial operations that lost chile, corn, grain, papaya, coconut, banana, sugarcane and honey.

Still, the Maya have learned to make the best of their situation, with or without the government.

"The government dispenses some resources here," Yeh said, studying the fallen tree. "But the community still helps itself."