

# Felix strengthens to Category 3 storm

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ORANJESTAD, Aruba --

Downpours and gusty wind from Hurricane Felix battered a cluster of Dutch Caribbean islands on Sunday, but the strengthening storm left little in its wake beyond downed trees, scattered outages and a sense of relief as it headed toward Central America.

The Category 3 storm drenched Aruba, Curacao and Bonaire, and tens of thousands of families and tourists holed up inside in homes and hotels stocked with water, flashlights and other provisions.

In Bonaire, many residents prepared for the worst, installing storm shutters and hauling their boats onto beaches, but sustained winds from Felix's outer bands left little damage in the early hours of the morning.

With 125 mph winds, Felix was on track to skirt Honduras' northern coastline Tuesday and plow into Belize on Wednesday as a Category 4 storm.

Siomara Albertus, who rode out the storm in her Belnem home with her Labrador retriever, said Felix subsided before dawn after a roughly two-hour lashing.

"Thankfully we didn't get a very bad storm. My dog slept peacefully through the night," the medical administrator said with a laugh.

In Curacao, about a dozen homes in a low-lying area were flooded. In Aruba, there was little visible damage, although at least one catamaran snapped off its mooring and a house was damaged by a downed tree. A northern settlement had a temporary power outage.

Tourists in the Dutch Caribbean islands remained in hotels overnight, government officials said. Aruba's airport was closed Sunday, but Bonaire's Flamingo Airport was reported to have remained open overnight.

Felix became the second Atlantic hurricane of the season on Saturday evening, following Hurricane Dean, which left at least 20 dead in the Caribbean and carved out a destructive swath that stretched from St. Lucia to Mexico.

At 2 p.m. EDT, Felix was centered about 490 miles southeast of Kingston, Jamaica, and was moving northwest at about 18 mph, according to the U.S. National Hurricane Center.

After passing Curacao and Aruba, the storm was expected to spin over the open waters of the central Caribbean Sea.

Felix changed directions constantly after nightfall and wobbled, making the storm's impact hard to predict, Curacao Lt. Gov. Lizanne Richards-Dindial said at a midnight news conference. "Felix is playing with us," she said.

On Saturday, Felix brought heavy rains and strong winds to Grenada as a tropical storm, ripping roofs off at least two homes and destroyed a popular concert venue. No injuries were reported and the Grenadian government was still assessing the damage Sunday.

The government of the Cayman Islands issued a tropical storm watch for Grand Cayman, the wealthy British territory's main island. A watch means that tropical storm conditions could begin affecting the island within 36 hours.

"Remember that Hurricanes Mitch, Wilma and Michelle passed far from the island yet tropical storm force winds, waves and storm surge damaged coastal areas," said Barbara Carby, director of the Cayman hazard management office.

Jamaica's government also issued a tropical storm watch. The island was battered by Dean on Aug. 19.

In Belize, residents stocked up on water and food, and nailed boards over their windows to protect against the hurricane's howling winds. Many in low-lying areas sought higher ground.

Things were more calm in Honduras, where authorities were keeping a close eye on the storm but hadn't started evacuations. Along the country's northern coastline, tourists were still lounging by the pool and enjoying the sun.

On Honduras' Roatan Island, home to luxury resorts and pristine reefs, the weather was normal and guests were simply enjoying their vacations, Mayan Princess Beach Resort & Spa employee Arturo Rich said.

Rebecca Waddington, a meteorologist at the hurricane center, advised employees of oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico to monitor Felix's progress and said the storm could reach the area in four to five days.

Along the Pacific coast of Mexico, meanwhile, authorities discontinued storm warnings as Tropical Storm Henriette moved out to sea.

Henriette dumped heavy rain on western Mexico earlier, loosening a giant boulder that smashed into a home in Acapulco, killing an adult and two children and injuring two other people. A teenager and her two brothers were also killed when a landslide slammed into their house in a poor neighborhood of the resort city.

Forecasters put it on a path that would not threaten land until Thursday, when it could hit a remote section of the Baja California peninsula.

