

Hurricane Felix Hammers Nicaragua and Honduras

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TEGUCIGALPA, [Honduras](#), Sept. 4 — Even as Hurricane Felix smashed ashore in northern [Nicaragua](#) on Tuesday and began inundating the adjacent Honduran countryside, it was an earlier storm, the devastating Hurricane Mitch of 1998, that haunted Hondurans.

A man in Honduras listened to the radio as Hurricane Felix began a potentially deadly march across the country.

Merchants recalled Mitch as they packed up belongings and hustled to higher ground. Residents told horror stories about it as they prayed that the new storm would not do what the earlier one did.

On Tuesday, Felix destroyed homes, flooded low-lying areas and caused thousands to flee for their safety. But Mitch lingered for a week over Central America, ripping off roofs, washing out bridges and causing such flooding that mountainsides collapsed, burying whole villages. An estimated 11,000 people died.

From early reports on Tuesday, it appeared that Felix would be no Mitch. At least one man, as yet unidentified, was reported drowned in the Miskito Keys, the Port Authority in Bilwi told La Prensa, and a baby died in a shelter in Puerto Cabezas in eastern Nicaragua, though the cause of death was unclear. Two fishing boats with 45 aboard were lost at sea after issuing distress calls at the storm's height, officials told La Prensa.

After making landfall the storm rapidly weakened from its powerful Category 5 status, with winds of 160 miles an hour, to a much more modest tropical storm, as it swept across Honduras, which it drenched with rain.

Still, Felix has already made history. It was the second Category 5 storm to rake the Caribbean coast this year, after Hurricane Dean — the first time two Category 5 Atlantic storms have made landfall during the same year, experts said.

And the National Hurricane Center in Miami said that Felix and another hurricane, Henriette, which simultaneously hit the southern tip of Baja California in Mexico, became the first Atlantic and Pacific [hurricanes](#) to make landfall on the same day since the center began keeping records half a century ago, The Associated Press reported.

Mexican authorities closed local airports and evacuated more than 2,000 people in the Los Cabos region from coastal dwellings to shelters, said the governor of Baja California Sur, Narciso Agúndez Montaña.

While still a tropical storm, Henriette left seven people dead over the weekend and caused mudslides along Mexico's southern coast.

It is Mitch, though, that Hondurans invoke as a benchmark for disaster.

“Last time, the water was up to there,” said Alexis Dormez, a clothing merchant, pointing to the roof of the Alvarez Market in downtown Tegucigalpa. “This whole market was flooded.”

Esperanza Chávez, 54, who acknowledged not taking Mitch all that seriously, was somber about the threat of Felix.

“I trusted in God last time and I lost everything,” she said. “This time, we’re going and we’re taking everything with us.”

Hondurans have become hurricane experts of sorts, speaking knowledgeably of the Saffir-Simpson scale that rates hurricanes from relatively mild Category 1 storms to killer Category 5’s. While Felix lost strength, many Hondurans recalled that Mitch had dropped its hurricane status and was a tropical storm when it devastated their country.

“With the memory of Mitch, we now know what can happen,” said Jose Mario Escobar, 58, whose hillside neighborhood here, known as El Chile, was flooded in 1998. “We didn’t know much about hurricanes before. We’re smarter now.”

Still, not everybody was heeding the calls to head for higher ground. Another lesson Mitch taught was that criminals might take advantage of the chaos to burglarize homes.

“I know it’s dangerous but if I go, I know my home will be robbed,” said Delia Maria Savala, 29, who lost her home to Mitch but still lives in a neighborhood along a riverbank that the government considers an endangered zone.

Those most vulnerable in the storm’s path, and the first to face its wrath, were Miskito Indians living in wooden homes along the remote Nicaraguan-Honduran border.

“I’m asking the people, no, I’m ordering them to leave their wood homes and head to shelters,” Marco Burgos, national commissioner of the Honduran emergency response center, told coastal residents over the radio. “Not one wooden house is going to survive such a hit.”

In Nicaragua, a Red Cross official, Claudio Vanegas, told The Associated Press by telephone from Puerto Cabezas shortly after Felix reached land nearby that the winds were vicious: “They send roofs flying through the air, so we aren’t going outside because it is too dangerous.”

Inside the Honduran government’s emergency operations center, soldiers in camouflage mixed with aid workers and government officials, all working to head off a repeat of the horrors of 1998.

“We’re much more prepared now than we were then,” Mr. Burgos, said, adding that the coastal evacuations, the alerts issued on local news media and the mobilization of local disaster committees were all legacies of Mitch. Even President Manuel Zelaya Rosales sat at a computer screen late Monday night, monitoring the storm’s trajectory.

Yet no matter the preparations, Honduras remains poor and vulnerable. “Most of our municipalities have no firefighters, no ambulances,” Mr. Burgos said. “The people have to save themselves.”