

Felix death toll rises to 65

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PUERTO CABEZAS, Nicaragua --

The death toll from Hurricane Felix rose to 65 on Thursday with the discovery of the bodies of 25 dead fishermen in the waters along Honduras' Miskito Coast, Nicaraguan and Honduran officials said.

The dead were believed to be from a group of 109 Nicaraguan Miskito Indians who sought refuge in canoes when Felix roared over them.

At least 52 found something to hang onto, fighting for hours to stay alive as huge waves and lightning crashed around them. At least 32 remain missing.

Earlier, Nicaraguan and Honduran officials put the death toll from Felix at 40, almost all of them along the coast.

The exhausted survivors told rescuers the storm caught them by surprise, flooding the tiny islands used by lobster fishermen off the Nicaraguan coast and forcing them to spend 16 hours clinging to anything that would float. Many suffered dehydration and were receiving medical care in the seaside town of Villeda Morales, on the Nicaraguan border.

U.S. and Honduran military officials were patrolling the ocean and inlets with helicopters and boats, while soldiers walked the beaches. Local villagers also were searching for the missing.

Interviewed by phone from the remote and swampy jungle coast, Honduran Col. Saul Orlando Coca told The Associated Press that 25 bodies had been found.

Honduran Defense Minister Aristides Mejia said he was sending boats and a military helicopter to the area to help in the rescue operation.

The ocean was filled with debris, preventing a rescue mission from coming ashore in Sandy Bay, where the eye of Felix made landfall Tuesday with catastrophic 160 mph winds and a storm surge estimated at 18 feet above normal tides.

About 150,000 Miskitos - descendants of Indians, European settlers and African slaves - live on island reefs and small jungle hamlets along the Honduran-Nicaraguan border.

Nearly 30,000 people were evacuated in Honduras, with nearly 10,000 seeking refuge in government shelters. The storm developed quickly and Nicaragua posted a hurricane warning less than 24 hours before the storm hit the coast.

From a distance, rescue teams at Sandy Bay could see fallen palm trees, roofless concrete structures and wooden homes reduced to splinters. Women on the shore wept in anguish. Food and fuel were scarce as emergency aid was airlifted into the hard-hit regional capital of Puerto Cabezas, a town difficult to reach even in good weather.

Those who endured the storm on land lacked fresh water. An AP photographer reached one isolated village where residents were breaking open fallen coconuts and had nothing else to drink.

The U.S. Southern Command sent the USS Wasp to Nicaragua to help coordinate U.S. relief efforts. Venezuela also sent aid and 57 Cuban doctors and nurses already established on the Miskito coast on medical missions were helping as well.

As Felix's remnants drenched Central America, Hurricane Henriette plowed into Mexico for a second time Wednesday, making landfall near the port city of Guaymas with top sustained winds of 75 mph before weakening as it headed inland.

The Hurricane Center said Henriette was dissipating Thursday along far northern Mexico, dumping rain on Arizona and New Mexico.

Nine deaths were reported from the Pacific storm, which hit Baja California on Tuesday. On Wednesday, a clam digger was swept away by high tides and a man fell from his roof while conducting repairs, Mexico's government news agency Notimex reported.

The national disaster-prevention agency issued warnings that the Ulua and Chamelecon rivers could overflow. The flood alert extended to low-lying areas of the northern industrial city of San Pedro Sula, Honduras' business capital.

In the aftermath of Henriette, hundreds of people woke up in shelters, and schools and ports were closed on Mexico's northwestern coast.

Among the drenched coastal communities was San Carlos, a beach town packed with American retirees next to the port city of Guaymas.

"It's deadly - the waves reached up to the boulevard," said Fatima Reyes, 23. "It blew away roofing, trees and signs."

Mexican navy Capt. Leopoldo Mendoza said a navy helicopter was searching the Bay of La Paz for a small boat that disappeared Tuesday amid high seas from Henriette. He said two Mexicans and two Japanese nationals were on board.