

Olga survivors complain of late warning

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SANTIAGO, Dominican Republic --

Survivors of a devastating flood lashed out at authorities Thursday for not warning that a dam's floodgates were being opened during Tropical Storm Olga, unleashing a deadly wall of water that killed as many as 20 people.

President Leonel Fernandez, who promised aid while touring the area to view the destruction, did not comment on the decision to rapidly release the water. He blamed global warming for the rare December storm with torrential rains.

The death toll stood at 25 across the Caribbean, including two other deaths in the Dominican Republic, two in northern Haiti and one in Puerto Rico.

As Olga began lashing the Dominican Republic with rain Tuesday, officials slowly released water from the Tavera Dam into the Yaque River, Octavio Rodriguez, a member of the committee that oversees dams during emergencies, told The Associated Press.

But fearing a dam failure that could kill thousands in Santiago, the country's second-largest city, the panel decided around 11 p.m. Tuesday to open all six floodgates an hour later, gushing 1.6 million gallons of water every second into the river.

The late-night decision gave authorities too little time to warn people living downriver - many of them already in bed.

Police and local officials took to the streets as midnight approached to warn that a devastating flood was on its way. But many people said they had just 15 minutes - or less - to flee before a wave of water 66-feet deep slammed into their homes.

"They warned us but there was no time ... everybody was sleeping," said 50-year-old Sonia Duran Maldonado, her voice shaking. "They must beg our forgiveness for what has happened."

On Thursday, dazed residents wandered through muddy wreckage of their brick homes, strewn along the flat river bank.

A woman sat on the front steps to her house - stairs rising to emptiness where the structure had stood. On another street, the back of an SUV was snagged in a second-floor window of an apartment building after being tossed there by the raging water.

Orlando Franco, a senior engineering professor at Santiago's Pontifica Universidad Catolica Madre y Maestra, said authorities released too much water and failed to have an effective alarm system in place.

"If there was a proper alarm system, this would not have happened. There would not have been a single death," Franco said.

Rodriguez, the dam committee member, said the panel was aware of the danger but was forced to release the water to avoid a collapse of the dam as rapidly accumulating water built up pressure behind it.

"We knew the damage we were going to cause below. We did not want to, but we had to," he said.

Olga weakened to a tropical depression and began to break apart as it moved west toward Cuba on Thursday, continuing to drop rain from outer bands over that island and the Bahamas, the U.S. National Hurricane Center in Miami reported.

Dominican emergency authorities searched for the dead in Santiago province, where at least 20 fatalities were confirmed. Homes were filled with mud and people looted some residences looking for food or supplies.

The storm displaced more than 34,000 people and damaged more than 7,500 houses, Dominican officials reported.

An elderly woman and a 3-year-old boy were killed in northern Haiti, where poor infrastructure could delay reporting on the storm's aftermath for days, said Marie Alta Jean-Baptiste, head of Haiti's civil protection department.

In Puerto Rico, a rain-triggered avalanche buried an SUV, killing a passenger.

Olga was only the 10th named storm to develop in the month of December since record-keeping began in 1851, the U.S. National Hurricane Center said. It passed through the Dominican Republic two weeks after the Atlantic hurricane season officially ended, and six weeks after Tropical Storm Noel left 87 dead.

Olga will be included in the tally for the 2007 hurricane season, bringing the number of named storms to 15, including six hurricanes. The next season begins June 1.