

Noel lingers over Cuba; wind, surf warnings in S. Fla.

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Trapped between Tropical Storm Noel, which sliced through central Cuba, and a powerful weather system to the north, South Florida swayed Tuesday under high winds and rough surf -- and warnings that both soon will intensify.

Noel's center was expected to remain far from South Florida and the area is not likely to experience anything like a hurricane or even a strong tropical storm, but conditions will deteriorate anyway.

Emergency managers advised swimmers to stay out of the ocean, boaters to stay in port and coastal residents to stay alert for local flooding and strong wind.

Scattered power outages are possible.

"We're closely monitoring the situation," said Michael Williams, a spokesman for Florida Power & Light. "Our crews are poised and ready for anything that might happen."

Noel weakened Tuesday morning after taking an unexpected jog over Cuba and then lingering there, cutting through the center of the island.

It was not expected to emerge from Cuba until Wednesday morning and then pass over or near Andros Island in the Bahamas with winds that strengthen but remain below hurricane strength.

Tropical storm watches and warnings covered eastern and central Cuba and the central and northwestern Bahamas.

"We are currently having breezy conditions, steady 20-25 knots in the capital at the moment," said Basil Dean, deputy director of the Bahamas meteorological office. "The forecast is for it to pick up."

He said the Bahamas is expected to begin experiencing tropical storm force winds in New Providence, where Nassau is located, around 10 a.m. Wednesday.

"We are just asking persons to ensure they don't have any loose materials like outdoor furniture that could become airborne," Dean said. "It's going to be almost business as usual. The rains are going to be the main factor."

A precautionary tropical storm watch could be issued for portions of South Florida later Tuesday, said forecaster Rick Knabb of the National Hurricane Center in West Miami-Dade County, but there is virtually no chance that Noel will hit the region as a hurricane.

"The chances of Noel becoming a hurricane appear less now and most of the objective guidance does not forecast this to occur," Knabb said.

Noel -- pronounced *knoll* -- has proven itself to be a disobedient and deadly storm, refusing to follow track and intensity predictions and killing at least 20 people in the Dominican Republic.

But its center should remain about 150 miles east of Miami and Fort Lauderdale, Knabb said. That would keep most of its squalls over the ocean and well away from the region.

Nevertheless, South Florida's weather will become increasingly blustery through Thursday, with sustained winds that approach tropical-storm intensity of 39 mph -- and higher gusts.

Also expected are 10-to-12 foot seas close to shore and rough surf that produces beach erosion, coastal flooding and dangerous rip currents.

The region is under a coastal high wind advisory, an inland high wind watch, a high surf advisory and a coastal flood watch. Swiftly moving but intense showers also are likely. Weak tornadoes or waterspouts are "a remote possibility," local forecasters said.

Nature seemed willing to provide the sound effects for trick-or-treaters who venture outdoors on Halloween. The forecast for Wednesday night: north winds 20 to 25 mph with gusts to 35 mph and a 20 percent chance of rain.

"I think the big concern is the wind," said Carl Fowler, spokesman for Broward's Emergency Management Agency, which is watching the storm but does not plan to activate its operations center. "Luckily, we are on the right side of the storm."

A spokeswoman for Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez said the county government also does not plan to open its Emergency Operation Center.

"We're not activated, we're just monitoring," said spokeswoman Suzy Trutie.

Schools are expected to remain open in both counties.

The building winds and rising surf are not directly connected to Noel but rather to a phenomenon called a "pressure gradient," with air rushing from a high pressure system north of the region to Noel, a low pressure system, to the south.

That, of course, is a mere technicality.

The bottom line: Some windy weather is ahead of us, regardless of the path taken by Noel, and South Floridians must prepare for it.

"Wind is wind," said Robert Molleda, the National Weather Service's warning coordinator for South Florida. "It doesn't matter where it's coming from. The fact is, this is going to be similar to what we'd expect if Noel were coming to us."

He advised South Floridians, especially those living along or near the coast, to stay off the beach, secure loose outdoor objects and exercise special care while driving, particularly along bridges or causeways in high-profile vehicles.

Boaters should remain in port and secure their crafts as quickly as possible.

In addition, the wind could be sufficiently strong to break some tree limbs and power lines.

"With winds that could gust up to 45 mph, we'll get some power lines down," Molleda said.

Meanwhile, Noel jogged west overnight along and across Cuba's northern coast. Its sustained winds reached 60 mph, then fell to 45 mph but were expected to grow to 60 mph by Wednesday afternoon.

Though that westward shift -- carrying it to closer to South Florida -- was a bit disconcerting, forecasters said they were confident that Noel soon would turn north and northeast, sweeping through the northern Bahamas but veering away from Florida.

"However, a tropical storm watch may still be required for southeast Florida later today if Noel moves farther westward than anticipated and the winds expand," said hurricane specialist Lixion Avila of the National Hurricane Center in West Miami-Dade County.

Noel's abundant rain already was blamed for at least 20 deaths in the Dominican Republic and significant damage there and in Haiti.