

Caribbean storm kills at least 20

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SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic --

Tropical Storm Noel headed toward the Bahamas on Tuesday after causing flooding and mudslides that killed at least 20 people in the Dominican Republic and left another 20 missing, officials said.

Forecasters said a tropical storm watch, which means that tropical storm conditions are possible within 36 hours, may be issued for southeast Florida later in the day.

The spinning tropical storm had been forecast to hit Haiti hardest but veered toward the Dominican Republic, apparently catching residents off guard Monday.

"We didn't know that it was going to be like this, it took us by surprise," said Guarionex Rosado as he left his home in La Cienaga, one of Santo Domingo's most affected neighborhoods.

Noel temporarily knocked out the Dominican Republic's entire power system early Monday, plunging 9.4 million people into the dark for about two hours, said Radhames Segura, vice president of the state-owned electric company.

Manuel Antonio Luna Paulino, president of the Dominican Republic's National Emergency Commission, said at least 20 people had died and another 20 were reported missing.

Three of those killed died when they were swept up by a fast-moving river in San Jose de Ocoa, southwest of the capital. Three more - a couple and their child - were killed in a mudslide in the port city of Haina, officials said.

International aid workers believe the death toll is certain to rise as reports come in from remote areas of the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

"I think this has taken some officials by surprise. The storm was predicted to go more toward Haiti," said Holly Inuretta, a regional adviser for U.S.-based Catholic Relief Services.

Haitian Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis said there were no immediate reports of casualties in his country, but he urged people to seek shelter. "It's moving very slowly and dropping a lot of rain," he said

Haiti is prone to deadly flooding because of its steep mountains and hills deforested by people who cut down the trees to make charcoal. Floods earlier this month killed at least 37 and sent more than 4,000 people to shelters.

At 8 a.m. EDT, Noel's top sustained winds were near 50 mph, down from 60 mph earlier in the day, according to the National Hurricane Center. Its center was over Cuba near Holguin and about 275 miles south of Nassau, Bahamas.

It was moving west near 12 mph, but was expected to turn away from Florida on Thursday or Friday and speed into the open Atlantic.