

Caribbean islands devastated by storm surge, winds, rain

By our reporter
11 September 2017

Hurricane Irma completed its passage through the islands of the Caribbean Sea Saturday, slashing along the northern coast of Cuba as a Category 5 storm, the most powerful to strike the country since 1924, before turning north toward the Florida Keys and the US mainland.

As it has repeatedly in previous storms, the Cuban government was more successful than any other in the region in conducting an orderly mass evacuation, which took one million people away from the endangered coastal regions along the eastern half of the island. No deaths have yet been reported in Cuba, although there was extensive and widespread storm damage throughout the region.

Irma made landfall in Cuba late Friday and then began to weaken and slow down, which only intensified the destructive impact, since the storm lingered over the affected area, moving at only 9 mph. At its height, there were sustained winds of 118 mph and a gust as strong as 159 mph reported at Falla, Cuba.

The northward turn took the hurricane away from the island's largest population center, the capital city Havana, but there were still evacuations of many waterfront neighborhoods in the city.

Because the most damaging winds from the hurricane are on the northeast and northern edges of the eyewall, Irma dealt its most damaging blows to the British and US Virgin Islands and to the southern Bahamas, as it moved through an ocean corridor with Puerto Rico, Hispaniola (comprised of Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and Cuba to its south.

With only fragmentary information available, at least five people were reported killed in the British Virgin Islands and another four in the US Virgin Islands. Trees were ripped out the ground by 130-mph winds

and many buildings were destroyed. Coastal roads in both island territories were largely destroyed by storm surge.

Officials have reported that at least 24 people have been killed overall. It is feared that the death toll will climb considerably once communications are restored and remote areas are canvassed. The Federal Emergency Management Agency said there was a "complete power/communications collapse" in the US Virgin Islands.

The impact of Irma on the Turks and Caicos Islands, a low-lying British possession, and on the central and southern Bahamas is still little reported, although the storm center passed through this region on Thursday night and Friday. Storm surge is the worst danger, since waters rose 15 to 20 feet, and most of these islands are just barely above sea level to begin with.

While Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico took less of a direct hit from the hurricane than Cuba, there was extensive damage reported, with power out in much of Puerto Rico and heavy flooding and mudslides in northern coastal areas of Haiti.

US military warships, helicopters and cargo planes were being sent to the US Virgin Islands, although half the Navy ships had to be diverted to avoid Hurricane Jose, another powerful storm that narrowly missed the Leeward Islands, which were hard-hit by Irma, before turning away to the north-northwest.

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