

Vast destruction revealed as Hurricane Dorian leaves the Bahamas

By Patrick Martin
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In scenes reminiscent of the drowning of New Orleans 14 years ago, desperate survivors of Hurricane Dorian are stranded on rooftops and other structures on the islands of Grand Bahama and Abaco, waiting for rescue in the wake of nearly two days of continuous battering by the giant storm.

As the hurricane moved very slowly toward the northwest, and winds that had topped 185 miles per hour abated, it became possible for the outside world to glimpse the full impact of the storm on the low-lying islands in the northern part of the Bahamas, home to 73,000 people.

The official death toll remains at seven, all on Abaco, but aerial photos showing that half of the houses on the two islands have been destroyed or suffered major damage and that nearly 60 percent of Grand Bahama remains under water suggest that the loss of life will be far greater.

Much of the public infrastructure in the two islands is under water, including the airport on Grand Bahama. Vehicles and shipping containers were thrown about by the storm surge and by wind gusts of up to 220 miles per hour.

According to one estimate, the storm surge from Dorian was as high as 23 feet—not counting waves and tides—while the highest point on Abaco and Grand Bahama is only 30 feet. Nearly every structure on the two islands was completely flooded up to the top of the ground floor.

Large tracts of housing have been reduced to splinters. One Bahamian government official said that nearly three-quarters of all homes on Grand Bahama remained under water. This includes the second-largest town in the Bahamas, Freeport, with a pre-storm population of 27,000.

Hurricane Dorian made landfall in the Bahamas

Sunday as a Category 5 storm and its eyewall remained over the two northern islands until early Tuesday, an unprecedented duration. It has since weakened to a Category 2, lingering off the east coast of Florida and moving slowly north toward Georgia and the Carolinas.

“It’s not just the power and ferocity of the storm, it’s also the length of time it spent over Abaco and Grand Bahama,” Marvin Dames, the minister of national security for the Bahamas, told the press. “That’s a disastrous outcome.”

Poverty and poor infrastructure have contributed to the scale of the disaster. One press report noted that two shantytowns, Mudd and Pigeon Peas, populated by Haitian migrants on Abaco, were especially vulnerable to the storm. Mudd was “decimated,” Prime Minister Hubert Minnis said on Tuesday night, in his initial remarks after surveying the area by helicopter.

No Bahamian government resources could reach Abaco or Grand Bahama on Tuesday, with all flyovers of the islands conducted by the US Coast Guard. Even military helicopters could not reach Grand Bahama, and there have been no outside rescue attempts on that island, the more populous of the two.

Aid agencies mobilized in Nassau, the Bahamian capital, but could not reach the affected area because of high winds and poor visibility. Rescue efforts on Tuesday were largely confined to local residents of the two islands, using small boats, jet skis and even rubber toys to reach people stranded by the storm.

A Coast Guard official told the press that there was a “large volume” of calls for help from people stranded on rooftops, who could not yet be reached.

Some 400 people were reported sheltering at the Grand Lucayan Resort and Casino on Grand Bahama, a government-owned property. The government appealed for residents of Grand Bahama to send their GPS

coordinates via WhatsApp if they were stranded.

Roger Russell, a cameraman for a television production company in Grand Bahama, who spoke with the *Washington Post*, was filming in the wreckage all day on Tuesday. “We are truly faced with a demon here,” he told the newspaper. “I saw little kids clinging, just clinging to people who rescued them. An old man was dehydrated and could not walk. A young lady told me she had been holding on to a pole—a wooden telephone pole—for 24 hours in the storm and she had to strap herself to the pole to survive.”

Bahamas Deputy Prime Minister Peter Turnquest told the *Post* that the cost of reconstruction would be astronomical. “With approximately 70 percent of the homes underwater, we anticipate tremendous social and economic dislocation and disruption in the short term,” Turnquest said.

The US military’s Northern Command is playing a major role in both the Bahamas and the low-lying areas along the Atlantic Coast of Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas. Air Force General Terrence O’Shaughnessy, who heads the Northern Command, said 5,000 national guard troops and 2,700 active-duty troops were deployed or alerted to respond to Hurricane Dorian. He said that the military was already providing significant logistical support in the Bahamas.

The hurricane itself has changed shape following its protracted contact with the Bahamas. It has become wider but its core, including the eyewall, has weakened in strength. Top winds are now below 130 miles per hour, but hurricane-force winds are extending farther from the center.

The National Hurricane Center (NHC) revised its tracking forecast to show Dorian remaining offshore but passing closer to the coast of the Carolinas and perhaps coming ashore south of Cape Hatteras. “A track that close to the coast, even if landfall does not occur, is likely to bring dangerous winds, life-threatening storm surge, and flooding rains across the eastern portion of the Carolinas,” an NHC statement warned.

The highest storm surges were predicted for Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina, at 10-11 feet. There were warnings that storm surge and waves of even greater height could carve new inlets in barrier islands along the coast.

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