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Hurricane Beta Hits Central America

by LADB Staff

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Hurricane Beta hit Nicaragua as a Category 2 storm with winds of 170km/hr near Sandy Bay Sirpi, 310 km northeast of Managua, on Oct. 30, causing floods, ripping off roofs, and toppling trees. It then swept across the country, weakening as it went, but dropping as much as 40 cm of rain before the afternoon was over. Acting on forecaster's predictions, authorities had evacuated thousands of people from the far eastern town of Gracias a Dios and along the Rio Coco on the Honduran border, some 200 km north of the impact point.

The miscalculation did not immediately result in deaths. But the surprise turn, caused by a high-pressure ridge, did send people in the impact area scrambling. In villages accessible only by boat, residents did not find out the storm was coming at them until 10:30 p.m., shortly before it hit.

Ana Maria Fajardo of Laguna de Perla recounted, "It was so surprising, at 10:30 at night we headed out with 50 or 60 boats to get people out. When we told people to move, they moved; nobody slept." She said some 1,500 people were evacuated this way from the 17 villages along the Laguna de Perla, but about 600 stayed behind because of strong winds. Fajardo, a local government official, said about 200 homes in her area were severely damaged, 80% of the houses in Tasba Pauni, and 50% in Setnet Point. She said other towns, including ground zero at Sandy Bay Sirpi, were under water. "They turned on the radio and found out the hurricane was right on top of them," she said.

The mayor of Rio Grande, Leslie Downs, said not all the people in his town were evacuated because they ran out of gasoline. President Enrique Bolanos appealed for international assistance to deal with the storm and its aftermath. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) responded with US\$150,000, followed by another US\$50,000 to obtain 5,000 hygiene packs and 200 rolls of plastic for roofing 1,200 emergency shelters. Nearly 80% of the houses in four communities in the impact area north of Bluefields, the capital of the Region Autonoma Atlantico Sur (RAAS), were destroyed. The Banco Centroamericano de Integracion Economica (BCIE) allocated US\$250,000, and the United Kingdom offered 40,000 tons of dried food for people in shelters.

Prior to the storm's landing, Bolanos had said, "Everything is prepared to save lives and help the population deal with these misfortunes and natural disasters that are coming our way, that are so powerful." He had already declared a "yellow alert" throughout the country and sent a delegation of ministers to the anticipated impact zone to oversee the preparation of shelters to house between 12,000 and 18,000 people.

The governments of Costa Rica and Honduras also prepared, although Costa Rica expected, and got, only peripheral damage.

In Honduras, a similar alert was issued, and President Ricardo Maduro ordered all governmental agencies to prepare. The storm passed across the isthmus rapidly, losing most of its force but

dumping a lot of rain. Nicaraguan civil defense chief Mario Perez Cassar noted, "Miraculously, only four people were reported missing and only one was injured." He said a detailed damage report would take some time, as the rains continued to fall. Juan Rodriguez, a disaster-prevention official, said the rains prevented flyovers needed to make damage assessments. In that sense, he said, "We are still in the 'during' phase of the storm."

In Honduras, an initial damage report was ready by Nov. 1. The Secretaria de Agricultura y Ganaderia (SAG) said damage to agriculture was substantial. Losses of banana, corn, papaya, yuca, and African palm were reported in the municipalities of Esparta, Arizona, and Jutiapa. Jutiapa is one of the poorest of the country's municipalities and was the hardest hit. In Valle del Aguan, it was estimated that the fruit harvest was hit with losses in mid-harvest. About 1,145 metric tons of fresh fruit were lost. As the rain continued, flooding continued to damage towns, neighborhoods, and roads.

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