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Mike Leffert

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The Second Category 5 Storm In A Single Season Smashes The Region

by Mike Leffert

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Hurricane Felix's perfectly carved core hit Nicaragua's Caribbean coast Tuesday morning, Sept. 4, a buzz saw spinning at 260 km/h cutting down everything standing. The Category 5 storm faded fast as it came ashore, but only to destroy with water what it did not smash with wind. "Our most serious problems in this region are just beginning," said a worker for the Irish aid agency GOAL in the Mosquito Coast town of Puerto Lempira, Honduras.

As its internal speed slowed, so did Felix's forward progress, the better to drown towns and villages in endless downpour. "The major concern now shifts to the threat of torrential rains over the mountains of Central America," said Richard Pasch at the National Hurricane Center (NHC) in Miami. "Isolated maximum totals of 25 inches are possible." The US-based meteorologist went on to recommend that persons living in flood-prone areas take precautions, seemingly unaware that he was talking about people who had nowhere to go, no way to get there.

For some, reported the Irish aid worker Luigi Lotto, the extent of precautions was to dig shallow trenches and cover themselves with palm fronds. Felix first touched Central America around 8 a.m. EDT in extreme northeastern Nicaragua, near Punta Gorda, about 16 km north-northeast of Puerto Cabezas.

Coming two weeks after Hurricane Dean hit the Yucatan Peninsula (see SourceMex, 2007-08-29), it was the first time in history that two Category 5 storms have come ashore in the same season, and the first time that Atlantic and Pacific hurricanes made landfall on the same day. Hurricane Henriette hit Baja California also on Sept. 4.

Early reports a major disaster

The next day, Sept. 5, early damage reports became available. Nearly every building on the Mosquito Coast was destroyed. Flooding was widespread and included the Honduran city of San Pedro Sula. Heavy rains continued. The director of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in Nicaragua, Conor Walsh, called the situation a "major disaster."

The militaries of both countries and US military personnel based at Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras sent out teams to search for the missing and assess the extent of the devastation. A US military statement to the media read, "Military planners will continue to work with interagency partners and their counterparts in countries affected by Felix to assess recovery needs in the affected areas and identify US military units that may be able to provide assistance."

Honduran Army Col. Orlando Cotarelo said reconnaissance flights would begin and added, "We are already readying the first air loads for their relief, and we are going to help our Nicaraguan brothers and sisters who have been hit very hard." He said they would be sending doctors, food, roofing, and bedding to their neighbor.

Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega supplied some of the earliest damage estimates. He said five people had died in Puerto Cabezas, one was missing, more than 3,000 homes were destroyed, 2,686 damaged, and at least 4,000 people were homeless. Ortega spoke as rains continued and officials warned there were still six to 10 inches to come in Nicaragua and El Salvador, eight to 15 in Honduras, and 25 inches were possible in some mountain areas, along with their inevitable flash floods and mudslides.

Reports continued: 20 fishers were missing and presumed dead; distress calls from boats with a total of 49 people aboard were intercepted. Reynaldo Francis, governor of Nicaragua's Region Autonoma Atlantico Norte (RAAN), said on local radio, "The morning found us in bad shape. This hurricane really hurt us, and we don't know how long it will take us to recover."

Puerto Cabezas' main Catholic church crumbled, as did all the main government buildings. Lampposts, electric and phone lines were all down, reported the governor. It will take some time to assess the full extent of it, to see what happened in each of many small indigenous communities of the RAAN, but it could have been worse, and would have, had not more than 12,000 people been evacuated just prior to the storm's arrival. The area is thickly forested, with no major roads.

People depend on plantations of beans, rice, cassava, and plantain, all assumed gone. Even without a definitive count, the expectations are not good.

Col. Rogelio Flores of the Defensa Civil said the number of people affected or evacuated was more than 40,000. He said teams were trying to get to Sandy Bay, Bismuna, Cayos Miskitos, and Cabo Gracias a Dios, the hardest hit, but had not been able to reach them. He estimated people in 75 shelters throughout the RAAN at about 14,000, all of whom had most probably lost everything they had owned. He said damage would mount with the expected flooding of the Rio Coco and Rio Viejo.

The continuing deluge had broken the road between Managua and San Francisco Libre, but the town was still reachable. Ortega flew to the coast, declared a state of national disaster, and promised RAAN residents that their homes would be rebuilt and they would be returned to a secure state as soon as possible. There was no way to calculate costs, said authorities.

Ortega said he would begin reorienting programs elsewhere toward emergency rehabilitation of the hard-hit area. The disaster declaration orders officials to move immediately to provide necessities for the zone.

A bright spot in Honduras

Tegucigalpa seemed to have been spared. Ground to a nub by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 (see Ecocentral, 1998-11-12 and NotiCen, 1999-11-04), the nation's capital experienced little more than

some drizzle under Felix, with no reports of death. "After Mitch we were very shocked and didn't have the energy and strength for another hurricane. Thank God nothing happened," said social worker Jose Luis Bordas. But plenty happened elsewhere in the country.

From the Bay Islands, more than 2,500 people were evacuated as the storm approached, 1,500 by ferry to the mainland and others by aircraft. Those with no money were airlifted, 80 at a time, on a government C-130. TACA airlines also flew people off the island free of charge. Even reduced to a tropical depression, as it was Sept. 5, the storm remained lethal. The storm had cleared out by Sept. 6, permitting a better assessment of the situation.

The death toll, still tentative, stood at around 40, with rescuers continuing to search the seas and reach isolated communities. Large numbers remained missing. The coastal seas were thick with debris, preventing rescue crews from coming ashore at Sandy Bay. Miskito Indian villagers had survived in that debris, grabbing onto whatever was afloat and at hand.

Carolina Echeverria, a Honduran congresswoman involved in the rescue of nine of these survivors, told reporters, "We think there are many more people floating in the sea." About 150,000 Miskitos live on tiny islands and hamlets along the coast near the Honduras-Nicaragua border. It is likely that the deaths of many will go unrecorded.

The US, Venezuela, and Cuba all seemed on the same side for once, as the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) sent the USS Wasp to the area, Venezuela sent aid, and Cuban doctors and nurses, already on medical missions in the area, helped.

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