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Hurricane Dean Fades, Leaving Behind Less Damage Than Expected

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MEXICO CITY, Aug. 22 — Hurricane Dean, with its ferocious winds, monstrous Category 5 status and long trail of death and debris, was certainly no dud. But the weakened storm that swept ashore on Mexico's gulf coast on Wednesday wreaked far less havoc than many anticipated it would.



“Dean will be remembered for being a very intense hurricane that could have done a lot more than it did,” said Jeff Masters, a meteorologist who tracked the storm for Weather Underground, a Web-based weather service.

One of the reasons, experts say, had to do with the storm itself. As it rolled across the Caribbean from Africa’s west coast, where it formed, it skirted major population centers.

It passed Martinique and St. Lucia, sparing them direct hits. Then it swept by the island of Hispaniola, drenching and causing damage in the Dominican Republic and Haiti but holding back much of its wrath.

Early on, the storm appeared to be bearing down on Jamaica, but it veered south, causing significant damage and three deaths but no knockout blows to the island’s critical tourist industry.

Even once it finally hit land, in Mexico on Tuesday on the Yucatán Peninsula and again on Wednesday on the gulf coast north of Veracruz, Hurricane Dean struck in spots with relatively low population densities and little tourist infrastructure. The hurricane was downgraded to a tropical storm just before 5 p.m. Wednesday and then downgraded again to a tropical depression late Wednesday night.

The response to the storm, the third most intense Atlantic hurricane to make landfall in recorded history, also helped lessen its impact. Experts say that the authorities acted more swiftly and took warnings more seriously than had been the case with previous storms.

In the coastal Mexican state of Quintana Roo, where memories of the devastation caused by Hurricane Wilma in 2005 are fresh, the authorities ordered flights into Cancún stopped well before Hurricane Dean hit, to prevent tourists from arriving at the last minute. The army went town to town in the Yucatán ordering residents to evacuate. Municipalities convened already established emergency committees to coordinate their response.

Everyone, it seemed, feared that the hurricane might equal some previous disaster. Jamaicans recalled Hurricane Gilbert, which flattened the island in 1988. Along Mexico's gulf coast, it was the flooding in 1999, which killed at least 350 people and destroyed tens of thousands of houses.

"We don't want the same thing to happen again, and we said, 'Let's get out of here,'" said Jesús Vargas, a worker at a tire repair shop about 30 miles inland from Tecolutla, in Veracruz, according to The Associated Press.

"Communities are much better prepared than during Hurricanes Ivan or Wilma, which hit the same region," Salvano Briceño, the chief disaster official of the United Nations, told Reuters. "People are learning from past experiences and are evacuating in time."

But Mr. Briceño added that fear of looting still prevented many people from leaving their property, an overlooked factor that needs to be addressed.

That was the case in Jamaica, where many shelters remained empty as the storm approached, and where many residents said they would rather die at home than in a substandard government shelter. “It is an issue that we need to work on,” said Omar Afflick, the Jamaican government’s acting senior director for preparedness and emergency operations. “But there was still far more awareness this time.”

The hurricane’s death toll stands at 13, although the authorities said that could rise as many hard-to-reach communities were inspected.

Early damage estimates indicate that the storm caused more than \$1.5 billion in insured losses, and perhaps a similar figure in uninsured losses. Its economic impact will be felt from the banana plantations of St. Lucia and Dominica to the beachfront bungalows that were washed away on the Yucatán.

While significant, the losses are small compared with those of some past hurricanes. Still, for people whose homes were submerged or livelihoods destroyed or relatives killed, Hurricane Dean will rank among the worst hurricanes, no matter how history judges it.

The disaster continues, in fact, for many of them, like the estimated 15,000 mostly poor people in Quintana Roo State who lost their homes.

“The big challenge is to get quickly to all these villages,” Félix González Canto, the governor of Quintana Roo, said in a television interview, “because when the days go by and authorities don’t arrive, people begin to get desperate and feel they’re not getting the attention they should.”

James McKinley Jr. contributed reporting from Cancún.