

Storm Misses Tourist Spots and Weakens



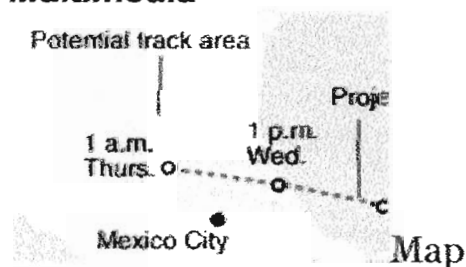
Jennifer Szymaszek for The New York Times

Marlene Tun Hoi dressed her son Leonardo, 3, on Tuesday amid the rubble Hurricane Dean left of their home in Chetumal, Mexico.

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CHETUMAL, Mexico, Aug. 21 — Hurricane Dean hammered Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula with blistering winds and heavy rain on Tuesday, missing the prime tourist spots of the Mayan Riviera but causing damage in Chetumal, the state capital, before being downgraded to Category 1 from Category 5.

Multimedia



The Path of Hurricane Dean

Roofs were ripped off homes, streets were flooded, power lines downed and trees snapped in two as Dean, the ninth-strongest hurricane on record in the Atlantic, with winds in excess of 165 miles per hour, passed overhead.

Although the storm crossed the Yucatán Peninsula by midafternoon, the threat was far from over for Mexico. Hurricane Dean was in the southern waters of the Gulf of Mexico, where vast offshore oil fields produce most of the nation's petroleum.

Dean had 80-mile-per-hour winds late Tuesday night, the National Hurricane Center in Miami said, and was expected to hit Mexico's gulf coast, somewhere north of Veracruz, on Wednesday afternoon.

Much of the storm's path was over largely uninhabited areas, so despite its early strength, no deaths were reported. But it was still soon to tell if the storm had affected remote communities or damaged the region's wildlife preserves. The Yucatán's mangroves, coral reefs and rain forests make it among the world's most biologically diverse regions.

"There will be damage to the ecosystem, of course, but conditions make it impossible for us to have any data yet," said José Solís, of the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas. Officials planned to fly over the peninsula on Wednesday for an initial assessment.

Early reports showed that the Mayan ruins along the eastern coast were not damaged, said Guillermina Escoto, a spokeswoman for the National Institute of Archaeology and History.

On the road from Felipe Carrillo Puerto, a small town 100 miles north of Chetumal, uprooted trees blocked traffic until federal police officers cleared the way with chain saws. In towns along the way, people were salvaging whatever they could from ravaged homes and stores. In Los Limones, a sports center had been crumpled like a piece of paper.

In Pedro Santos, about 45 miles north of Chetumal, Jacobo Reyes, 32, a grocer, stared at the concrete block walls of his store, which was

missing its tin roof. “We thought it would stand up pretty well, but it wasn’t the case,” he said.

His mother, Carmen Bustillos, 54, said she could not stand living in a hurricane alley. “I think now we should rebuild in a new place, start all over again,” she said.

Chetumal took the brunt of the storm. Streets were inundated and debris was everywhere. Hundreds of trees lay strewn along major thoroughfares, and thousands of people were without power and running water. But with no deaths reported, city officials said that they were relieved.

It appeared that the storm, although brutal, would not cause the devastation of Hurricane Wilma, which washed away whole beaches in Cancún in 2005, killed seven people and caused more than \$2 billion in damage.

“If it had come through Cancún, we would be talking about a different level of damage,” Dennis Feltgen, a meteorologist at the National Hurricane Center, said by telephone.

Chetumal, the capital of Quintana Roo State and a major center for trade with neighboring Belize, has a long history of hurricane damage. Two hurricanes in the 1940s wiped it out. In 1955, a storm devastated it. Each time, the city rebuilt, using more concrete to buttress itself against the wind.

The Mexican president, Felipe Calderón, left a meeting in Quebec with the leaders of Canada and the United States and arrived here Tuesday evening to see the extent of the damage. President Bush expressed support for him and said, “U.S. agencies are in close touch with the proper Mexican authorities, and if you so desire help, we stand ready to help.”

The damage extended across the border to Belize, where residents scattered to the safety of shelters as the storm moved in.

“We live near a swamp, and the crocodiles come out,” Chyla Gill told Reuters. She and her family had fled her wooden house in Belize City for a more fortified school building.

The eye of the hurricane made landfall around 4:30 a.m. near the tourist resort of Majahual, about 40 miles northeast of Chetumal, the National Hurricane Center said.

On Tuesday morning in Felipe Carrillo Puerto, the wind howled and power failed after the overnight deluge.

As the sky became lighter, winds bent trees, tore corrugated iron roofs and knocked down signs. The streets were filled with water and littered with palm fronds and other debris. Overhead, clouds slid rapidly west.

The town’s police chief, Abraham Oliva, said that the eye of the hurricane had passed through Laguna Guerrero, about 19 miles north of Chetumal.

In the center of the old town, people peered timidly from their windows to assess the damage. Álvaro Sosa Marvil, a veterinarian who lives in the town square, said he was relieved to find at dawn that the destruction was not as bad as had been predicted.

“This is a price one pays for living in a privileged place — the Caribbean,” he said, as he looked at the downed trees in the town square. “Nature collects a toll from us.”

James McKinley reported from the Yucatán, and Marc Lacey from Mexico City. Elisabeth Malkin contributed from Mexico City, and Graham Bowley from New York