



Today – August 23, 2007

Tropical Depression Dean drenches central Mexico

Dean came ashore on Mexico's mainland at midday Wednesday with top sustained winds of 100 mph. Its center hit the tourism and fishing town of Tecolutla, in the Gulf coast state of Veracruz. The wide storm's hurricane-force winds lashed at a 60-mile stretch of the Mexican coast in Veracruz.

"There's been a tremendous amount of damage across the state," Veracruz Gov. Fidel Herrera told the Televisa television network Thursday. In the vanilla-harvest heartland of Papantla, "a huge number of roofs were ripped off houses," he said.

"It's a miracle we don't have any deaths."

In the storm-lashed Veracruz city of Poza Rica, neighbors banded together to clear the streets of fallen trees with axes and machetes, while workers began reconnecting downed power lines. Dean killed 20 people in the Caribbean but there were no reported deaths so far in Mexico.

As it pushed inland, Poza Rica, located 30 miles from Tecolutla, became the area's command center, and hundreds of people remained in shelters there late Wednesday.

Maria Patricia Perez, a 40-year-old merchant in Poza Rica, had the tin roof ripped completely off her house. "We were afraid it would knock down everything," she said.

Exhausted residents said they helping one another battle Dean's rains and winds.

Shopkeeper Joel Cruz's house was left without electricity or telephone lines after a 30-year-old pine tree gave way, but it could have been worse.

Amid the howling winds, his neighbors helped him tie ropes around the tree and they were able to direct its fall away from his home. They also managed to move two cars away just before the giant tree came down.

"It was an adventure we survived," the 30-year-old Cruz said.

Late Wednesday, Poza Rica residents took stock of the damage — and agreed it could have been much worse.

"A lot of homes were left without roofs," said Mariano Gutierrez, head of Civil Defense in Poza Rica. "Many trees fell on public streets and on houses. There are many fallen signs. But so far, thank God, we don't have anything serious."

Dean hit the mainland as a Category 2 storm after regaining some of the force it unleashed on the Yucatan. Its first strike on the peninsula Tuesday as a Category 5 tempest with 165-mph winds was the third-most intense Atlantic hurricane ever to make landfall.

Mexico had suspended offshore oil production and shut down its only nuclear power plant as tens of thousands headed for higher ground. The state oil company said there was no known damage to any of its production facilities on shore or in the Gulf of Mexico.

Producers of corn and sugar cane likely suffered heavy losses in Veracruz, a key agricultural state. Coffee plantations at higher elevations also were threatened by the heavy rains, industry officials said.

Although Dean swept over Yucatan as a rare Category 5 hurricane, which is capable of causing catastrophic damage, the storm's top winds were relatively narrow and appeared to hit just one town: the cruise ship port of Majahual.

Most of those in Majahual fled ahead of the storm, which demolished hundreds of houses, crumpled steel girders, splintered wooden structures and washed away parts of concrete dock that transformed what once was a sleepy fishing village into a top cruise ship destination.

Greatly weakened from its trip across the peninsula, Dean moved across the southern Gulf of Mexico, home to 100 oil platforms, three major oil-exporting ports and the Cantarell oil field, Mexico's most productive. All offshore production was halted ahead of the storm, reducing daily production by 2.7 million barrels of oil and 2.2 billion cubic feet of natural gas.

But Pemex said its offshore platforms and loading facilities would emerge without major damage.

Contributing: Associated Press writers Julie Watson, Lisa J. Adams, and Paul Kiernan in Mexico City. Mark Stevenson in Majahual and John Pain in Miami contributed to this report.

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