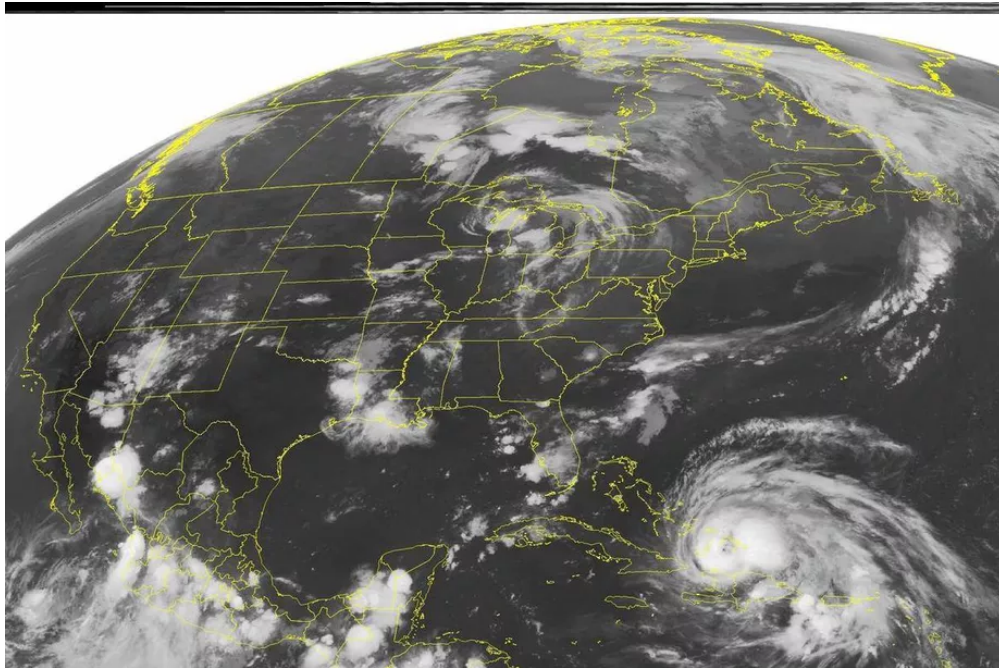


U.S. & WORLD WORLD & NATION BUSINESS

Hurricane Irene menaces smaller islands of Bahamas

By Associated Press | Aug 24, 2011, 4:56pm MDT



This NOAA satellite image taken Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2011 at 1:45 a.m. EDT shows Hurricane Irene, a category 2 storm with winds up to 100 mph and located about 400 miles southeast of Nassau. The storm is expected to persist northwestward, over the Bahamas, remaining east of Florida, and heads towards the Carolina coast. US landfall is likely on Saturday as a category 3 storm over the Carolinas. Meanwhile, a frontal boundary moving through the Great Lakes and Midwest kick up a few more scattered showers and thunderstorms. Some of these storms turn severe with strong winds and hail. Hot temperatures return to the Plains as a ridge builds in behind this trough. | WEATHER UNDERGROUND, AP PHOTO

NASSAU, Bahamas — A large and powerful Hurricane Irene was roaring its way Wednesday across the entire Bahamas archipelago, knocking down trees and tearing up roofs and posing the most severe threat to the smallest and least populated islands, officials said.

Bahamian Prime Minister Hubert Ingraham said there have been no major injuries or deaths according to preliminary reports he has been receiving from throughout the

widely scattered islands. But he added that they would not know the full extent of damage from the Category 3 storm until it is clear of the country on Friday.

Ingraham said the latest storm data seemed to indicate that lightly populated Cat Island was in particular danger because the storm was expected to pass over the entire length of the island. Forecasters said New Providence, the largest and most populated island, would see tropical-storm-force winds for more than 12 hours.

This was only the third time since 1866 that a hurricane has gone across the entire length of the island chain, Ingraham said, and the country was bracing for extensive damage to buildings and infrastructure. But the prime minister predicted few casualties overall.

"As a general statement we do a fair job of managing hurricanes so personal injuries, we hope, will not be substantial," he said in an interview with The Associated Press at an emergency operations center in Nassau. "Property damage, vegetation, public infrastructure, yes, but as a general statement we would hope that personal injuries would be minimized."

The latest forecast was good news for Nassau, which is on New Providence, and is home to more than 200,000 and is a major tourist destination. Capt. Stephen Russell, director of the National Emergency Management Agency, told AP that the capital should only see "the fringes of tropical storm winds," according to tracking data.

"That should go very well for us unless the system alters its course during the next 24 hours," Russell said.

Authorities set up emergency shelters throughout the country but most locals were expected to stay in their own homes or with friends and family while visitors stayed in the handful of hotels that remained open for what was expected to be a rough next few days.

As darkness fell in the capital, and the first strong winds and rain began to lash the city, the streets were largely deserted. Earlier, the capital buzzed with last-minute preparations as people gathered what last-minute supplies were still available and shop owners boarded up their windows. Nassau, which surrounded by sparkling

greenish-blue ocean, is known to flood even in heavy rain so the storm surge was expected to make many roads impassable, especially in the colonial downtown.

Many visitors weren't waiting around to find out what would happen and fled the country, waiting in long lines to catch planes before the airport closed. Some tourists had no choice but to leave since smaller hotels abruptly closed and larger ones were booked up with Bahamian residents looking for a place to ride out the storm. Others flying out simply didn't want to take their chances with what could be a major storm.

"I've been through one hurricane and I don't want to see another," said Susan Hooper of Paris, Illinois, who was cutting short a trip with her husband, Marvin, to celebrate their 23rd wedding anniversary. "My main concern is what if something happened to the airport. How would I get home?"

Maureen Fallon, a 39-year-old consultant from Annapolis, Maryland, was forced to abandon a trip with six friends through the Bahamas archipelago on a 47-foot (14-meter) catamaran. They tried rerouting the boat as the storm developed but gave up less than halfway through after the U.S. State Department issued a warning to travelers.

"I'm pretty bummed," she said. "But there was just no way. It was way too dangerous."

Meghan Stark, traveling with her mother and 5-year-old son, arrived at the airport exhausted and frustrated after their hotel closed and told all guests to leave, less than 24 hours after first telling them the storm was not likely to pose a major threat to Nassau.

Stark, a college student from Baldwin, New York, arrived in the Bahamas on Monday for a weeklong stay that had already been delayed after a storm in New York postponed their flight for two days. Staff at their hotel, Sandypoint Beaches Resort, initially reassured them that the storm wasn't a major danger.

"We had asked them when we got here about the storm and they said, 'Don't worry about it, these things blow over,'" she said.

Less than 24 hours later, Stark and her family found their room keys not working and the staff telling them to clear out. They spent the night racking up an expensive cell

phone bill trying to book a flight out. At one point, they considered and rejected the option of staying in a refuge being set up in one of the larger hotels. On Wednesday morning, they were forced to leave early.

Irene was centered about 215 miles (345 kilometers) southeast of Nassau with winds of 120 mph (195 kph).

As the storm crossed southern Mayaguana Island, it uprooted trees, blew shingles off roofs and knocked several lampposts down, leaving the entire island without power, said Police Inspector Vernon Rahming.

"It's moving away from us, and now we can start to do some cleaning up," he said.

On Crooked Island, Irene did similar damage, tearing the roof off of a high school, local administrator Bernard Ferguson said.

"We have been unable to assess it fully, but from a quick drive through we have quite an extensive bit of damage," he said.

Irene is expected to become a Category 4 hurricane by Thursday as it passes over the northwestern Bahamas en route to the eastern U.S. coast, said the U.S. National Hurricane Center in Miami, Florida.

Irene barreled through the Turks and Caicos Islands late Tuesday as a Category 1 hurricane, blowing off some roofs and downing power lines, said Emily Malcolm, district commissioner for South Caicos island.

No deaths or injuries have been reported, she said.

Puerto Rico, which also was hit by Irene, is still struggling with heavy flooding that has stranded motorists and affected several neighborhoods. Dozens of landslides have been reported and 765 people remain in shelters, Gov. Luis Fortuno told a news conference Wednesday, two days after he declared a state of emergency.

On Tuesday, a 62-year-old woman died at a hospital after trying to cross a swollen river in her car near the capital of San Juan, police said.

Tens of thousands of people still remain without power in the U.S. Caribbean territory.

In the Dominican Republic, flooding has stranded at least 85 communities and nearly 32,000 people have been evacuated. Emergency crews equipped with lifejackets and ropes on Wednesday rescued families whose homes were being flooded by a swollen river in the city of San Cristobal, just west of the capital.

Far to the south in Cuba, the storm sent waves crashing over the seawall in the extreme eastern city of Baracoa, causing ankle-deep flooding and damaging some sidewalks.

Governments across the Caribbean are monitoring another cluster of thunderstorms that have a 60 percent chance of becoming a tropical cyclone and are expected to arrive this weekend.

Associated Press writers Danica Coto in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Ezequiel Abiu Lopez in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, APTN senior producer Fernando Gonzalez in Baracoa, Cuba, and Megan Reynolds in Nassau, Bahamas, contributed to this report.