

Haiti 'got very lucky' as Tomas skirted island

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People walk in a flooded street after the passing of Hurricane Tomas in the neighborhood of Cite Soleil in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Saturday Nov. 6, 2010. (AP Photo/Ramon Espinosa)

(AP) -- Hurricane Tomas pushed northward from Haiti on Saturday, leaving villagers to mop up, evacuees to return to their tents and most everyone relieved that the country did not suffer what could have been its first big disaster since the January earthquake.

The storm's western track caused widespread floods, wind damage along the far edge of Haiti's coast and is blamed for the deaths of at least eight people. It was a serious blow, but far better than had been feared in a nation where storms have been known to kill thousands, and more than 1 million quake survivors were living under tarps and tents.

"It really didn't dump a lot of rain on us, so we got very lucky," said

Steve McAndrew, [Haiti](#) earthquake relief coordinator for the American Red Cross.

Haitian civil protection officials were still receiving reports from the remote mountainous countryside and the storm's outer bands continued dropping rain on the north. Floodwaters covered streets in Leogane, the town closest to the epicenter of the Jan. 12 quake, and about a foot of water stood on a thoroughfare of the flood-prone northwestern city of Gonaives. Mountain towns were cut off by flooded roads and [landslides](#), including one reported by U.N. peacekeepers in the mountains near the southern port of Jacmel.

But it was clear that the most-feared catastrophes were averted: Earthquake camps were not torn apart by wind, [storm](#) surge did not drown the oceanside slums, the La Quinte River - which has twice drowned Gonaives above the first stories of its buildings since 2004 - stayed in its bed.

U.S. Marine helicopters buzzed the southern coast from the USS Iwo Jima, reporting back good news.

"It sounds like from what everybody's seeing that it's no worse than after a major storm here. There's some standing water out there but nothing's washed away," U.S. embassy spokesman Jon Piechowski said.

Aid workers and the government in part credited mitigation efforts - for instance a U.S. Agency for International Development-funded effort to dredge and reinforce the La Quinte after the last catastrophic flood there in 2008. Haitian civil protection coordinator Nadia Lochard, who oversees Port-au-Prince, said lives were saved because people listened to the department's advice.

But given the tumult during last-minute preparations of the storm, it is

clear things could have been much worse if the storm had veered to the east.

The U.N. Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported shortages in shelter material and other items, including rehydration salts for a cholera epidemic that officials were concerned the floods could spread. That danger remains, and medical workers were working across affected areas Saturday to contain the spread of the outbreak.

Despite official instructions to abandon earthquake camps in the capital, the vast majority of people remained in their tarps, leaving evacuation buses to drive away empty. Many were concerned that the storm was a pretext to evict them, or that bandits would steal their belongings while they were away.

In camps that did flood in Leogane - and the capital in post-storm rains that fell Friday night - most people left only at the last minute. Others remained, surrounded by rising waters and yelling for help.

At the government's flagship relocation camp, Corail-Cesselesse, chaos reigned long into the night. Disorganization between various aid groups and confusion among the nearly 8,000 residents sparked a near-riot as the evacuation got under way. The residents had moved to the remote location with the promise that it would protect them from storms, but the government-selected, internationally approved site turned out to be a dangerous flood plain.

Once the evacuation got under way, several thousand people were packed into an abandoned hospital named for the wife of a former dictator. A loud crash at the back of the building around midnight sparked shouts of "[earthquake!](#)" and a panic ensued. Three people were injured and had to be sent to a real hospital.

"They were evacuating people but they weren't telling them where they were going," said Abenel Rezuiz, a 30-year-old resident of the camp.

Tomas weakened into a tropical storm early Saturday but regained its hurricane strength later in the day with winds of 80 mph (130 kph), according to the U.S. National Hurricane Center in Miami.

The [hurricane](#) was located about 275 miles (440 kilometers) north-northeast of Grand Turk Island and was expected to continue moving to the northeast into open water. All storm warnings were discontinued.

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