

Cuba counts the cost of deadly Hurricane Irma

September 11 2017, by Adalberto Roque, Alexandre Grosbois, Maylin Alonso



Cubans wade through a flooded street near the Malecon seafront promenade in Havana, on September 10, 2017.

Cuba emerged from a 72-hour thrashing by Hurricane Irma on Monday with three-quarters of the population without power, as the country began the task of restoring basic infrastructure and services.

A death toll of 10 made this the deadliest hurricane to strike the island since Dennis in 2005, and authorities said that provisional figure could rise.

Among the worst-hit areas were Havana, where at least seven bodies were recovered, and the coastal towns of Caibarien and Cojimar.

Dazed citizens like Yanmara Suarez surveyed the devastation in the historic old town of Havana, largely submerged by a wind-whipped tidal surge that left many people wading in waist-high water over the weekend.

"This is going to be catastrophic, because many buildings here are not able to handle a deluge of water like this," said the 36-year old businesswoman.

Municipal employees were busy clearing up the damage early Monday, removing fallen trees and clearing rubble and seawater. Havana residents remained without water supplies and phone connections and schools were closed until further notice.

Authorities said most of the country remained without power.

President Raul Castro warned Cubans they faced "hard days" ahead to rebuild "what the winds of Hurricane Irma have tried to wipe out".

The civil defense organization said most of the country's provinces had reported "serious destruction" to the agricultural sector.

In Caibarien, a port city which suffered the wrath of Irma's 150 miles per hour (250 kilometers per hour) winds, it seemed likely that it would be some time before any semblance of normalcy is restored.

"This is a disaster. If it lasted one more day, then there would be nothing at all left here," said Angel Cordero, a 69-year-old farmer whose home, along with his crops of bananas, sweet potatoes and papaya were flooded.



Damaged houses in Cojimar near Havana, on September 10, 2017

Cojimar, a fishing village a short distance from the capital that was made famous by the writer Ernest Hemingway, was also counting the cost of Irma's Category Five ferocity.

It smashed houses here, scattering furniture and air-conditioning units along the rubble-strewn seaside promenade.

"This is a big warning already, when you know that climate change is

getting more and more cruel," said Francisco Garcia, coach of Cuba's national karate team, whose home here was partially destroyed.

"We've had three hurricanes and an earthquake in the same zone at the same time, we've never seen anything like it before," he said, referring to triplet of hurricanes Jose, Katia and Irma and the huge earthquake in Mexico that killed 96 people.

Tourism in trouble

Hotels and other tourism infrastructure along the eastern island chain known as the Cayos were largely destroyed, though the tourists themselves were evacuated to safer ground ahead of the onrushing Irma.

Argentines Alfredo and Maria Teresa Colonel were among thousands of tourists moved to hotels in the eastern resort of Varadero.

"It was our first experience of a hurricane, which we don't have at home. Overall, we got through it fairly well, though we were a little scared," said Alfredo.

But as in much of Cuba, the immediate future is uncertain for the Cayos.

"I really don't know how long it will take me to get back to work, this [hurricane](#) must have destroyed the Cayo," said Enrique Pena, a 33-year-old cook in a hotel in Cayo Santa Maria.

Irma's impact on tourism still has to be assessed, but it will undoubtedly weaken an economy that is heavily dependent on the some \$3 billion a year generated by a sector that was showing promising growth.

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