

With ingenuity and solidarity, Cubans prepare for Irma

September 8 2017, by Rigoberto Diaz



Cubans in the seaside town of Caibarien cart their belongings for safekeeping as they prepare for Hurricane Irma

Some tie down the roof tiles on their houses with fishing line and others open their homes to friends and neighbors seeking refuge against Hurricane Irma.

With ingenuity and in a spirit of solidarity, the people of Caibarien, on the north central coast of Cuba, are bracing for Irma's wrath.

"This is going to be total destruction. Just look at the state of the houses," said electronic engineer Ariel Hernandez, gesturing to the houses in his seaside neighborhood, nearly all of them with roofs of zinc tile.

Caibarien is a town of 40,000 east of Havana where fishing is a way of life.

Pliers in hand, Hernandez has decided to tie down his roof for fear Irma's high winds will rip them off and turn them into lethal projectiles.

"I use fishing line. I don't have anything else," the 53-year-old says.

On his mind as he works is the knowledge that Irma, currently a Category Four storm packing 240 kilometer per hour (150 mph), has already left death and destruction in other Caribbean islands.

Caibarien is the only town in the north central zone under a hurricane warning.

Irma has already begun moving between Cuba's north coast and the central Bahamas, and rains and rising winds have begun to be felt in Havana.



An elderly Cuban woman carries belongings to protect them from the arrival of Hurricane Irma, in Caibarien

But for Caibarien, the maximum point of danger is expected to come early Saturday when the storm's eye is forecast to be closest to Cuba.

The town's older residents remember Hurricane Kate in 1985 and a storm surge that dumped fishing boats in the town's center.

"The sea rose to the height of the electric power lines," said Rodolfo Suarez, a 73-year-old fisherman.

'Save lives'

General Joaquin Quintana Solas, the deputy minister of the armed forces, met Thursday with Caibarien's defense council to work out evacuation strategies.

Suarez said he saw officials in military uniforms tour the town to assess who would need to be evacuated.

"Many are going to take shelter with relatives and others are going to the centers that the state has prepared," he said.



Cubans carry food in a truck before the arrival of Hurricane Irma, in Caibarien

But if there is a strong storm surge, "nobody will be left here, one way or the other," he said grimly.

Juan Antonio Carrillo, a 47-year-old furniture finisher, has a well-built house of brick with concrete ceilings. He has invited his neighbors to take refuge there.

"Anyone who wants to come here is welcome," he said. "We'll sleep on the floor. The issue is to save lives," he said as he stocked up on drinking water.

The evacuations include thousands of foreign tourists vacationing in Cayo Santamaria.

This paradise, with fine sand beaches and crystal clear water, can be reached from Caibarien by a stone path, but it will be closed during the hurricane.

Fear and urgency

Many in the town rushed to markets to buy candles and batteries. State food stores were doling out staples.



Cubans put their fishing boats in safe places ahead of the arrival of Hurricane

Irma, in Caibarien

Beneath the outward calm, residents are scared.

"I bought some food, I got all my things and I have them at my neighbor's house," said 85-year-old Odelia Gutierrez. But "how can I not be afraid," she added.

Her biggest fear, she says, is that Irma "takes the roof" of her [house](#).

Townpeople used horse-drawn carts to haul their electrical appliances to houses of friends or relatives.

Some 60 boats and fishing vessels were moved to a shelter protected by mangroves in Cayo Conuco, near Caibarien.

"In the event it's a tough hurricane, they are going to send a car to get us, because first comes protecting lives," said Yosmel Gonzalez, one of the three guards at the shelter.

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