

Winds, rain batter western India as cyclone veers away

June 13 2019, by Rajesh Joshi



Cyclone Vayu had been expected to hit Gujarat with full force

High winds and heavy rains pounded western India on Thursday as a major cyclone expected to hit the coast veered away instead into the Arabian Sea.

Vayu, classified as a very severe cyclonic storm, moved north-northwestwards in the night over the Arabian Sea, and was around 110 kilometres (70 miles) from the coast of Gujarat state.

It was "very likely" to keep moving in the same direction, but still skirt the coast, packing winds of 135-145 kilometres (84-90 miles) per hour and gusts of 160 kilometres (100 miles) per hour, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said.

"The threat of surge in wind, dust storm and rainfall remains very much. The centre of the storm—known as the eye—has slightly moved away from the Gujarat coast, but its diameter is well over 900 kilometres (560 miles)," an IMD official told local media.

Heavy rains are likely to continue until Saturday, Gujarat IMD chief Jayanta Sarkar told AFP.

On Wednesday, forecasters had been bracing for the system to hit Gujarat with full force winds equivalent to a category one or two hurricane.

Authorities in Gujarat evacuated more than 285,000 people as a precaution. Schools have been closed, with officials fearing major damage to houses, crops, power lines and communications.

Five people have been killed by lightning in Gujarat, mostly farmers and labourers working in fields, authorities said.

The Air Force, Coastguard and Navy were all on high alert, with 36 teams from the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) deployed in coastal areas.

On Thursday, the eye of the cyclone was some 110 kilometres (70 miles)

from Veraval, a major hub of India's fisheries industry, exporting to Japan, South East Asia, Europe, the Gulf and the United States.

The state also houses major ports as well as the Jamnagar oil refinery, the world's largest.

All ports in Gujarat halted the berthing of vessels from Wednesday, while Indian Railways cancelled 77 trains.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who comes from Gujarat, said Wednesday that the central government was closely monitoring the situation.

"Praying for the safety and well-being of all those affected by Cyclone Vayu," he tweeted.

Cyclones are relatively rare in Gujarat, but they can be destructive and dangerous. The worst was in 1998 when more than 4,000 people died.

Vayu is India's second major storm this year.

In May, Cyclone Fani—with winds up to 200 kilometres per hour (125 miles)—killed around 80 people in eastern India and Bangladesh, damaging half a million houses and knocking out power, water and communications.

But Odisha authorities won praise from the United Nations and others for evacuating more than a million people and averting what could have been a much higher death toll.

Improved forecasting models, public awareness campaigns and well-drilled evacuation plans—backed up by an army of responders and volunteers—helped the eastern state prepare well.

The latest weather system was also drawing moisture away from much-needed annual monsoon rains, with almost half of India hit by drought and many areas experiencing a heatwave.

With temperatures exceeding 50 degrees Celsius (122 Fahrenheit) in the northern states of Rajasthan, water shortages have left huge numbers of people reliant on water trucks.

The monsoon arrived in the south-western state of Kerala late last week but was several days behind schedule.

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