

Storm pummels Caribbean with heavy wind, rain en route to US

July 29 2020, by Dánica Coto

Heavy rains pummeled the eastern Caribbean on Wednesday due to a weather system headed to Puerto Rico and other islands that was expected to develop into a tropical storm and unleash flooding and landslides.

The U.S. National Hurricane Center in Miami said the storm system was expected to move near or just south Puerto Rico on Wednesday night, then brush the northern shores of Hispaniola the following day on a path that could take it to the U.S. mainland by the weekend.

The center said the system is expected to strengthen before it move near or over the Dominican Republic on Thursday and eastern Cuba on Friday, although it cautioned it's still unclear what it would do in upcoming days: "Simply put, there are a lot of hurdles in the system's way, so it is best to stay on the conservative side at the moment and continue to stress the large uncertainty after it leaves the Caribbean," the advisory said.

Forecasters issued tropical storm warnings for Puerto Rico, the British and U.S. Virgin Islands, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Martin, St. Maarten, Saba, St. Eustatius, Turks and Caicos Islands and portions of Haiti, the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas. A tropical storm warning means that tropical storm conditions are expected within within 36 hours.

The forecast warned the islands could experience 3 to 6 inches (8 to 15

centimeters) of rainfall, with up to 10 inches (25 centimeters) in isolated spots.

Officials in Puerto Rico expressed concern about the potential for landslides and flooding and noted the U.S. territory is struggling with a spike in coronavirus cases while also still recovering from 2017's devastating Hurricane Maria and a string of earthquakes earlier this year that damaged or destroyed hundreds of homes in the island's south.

At a news conference, Gov. Wanda Vázquez predicted the storm would cause power outages. Puerto Rico's power grid was destroyed by Maria and the rebuilt system is fragile and susceptible to failures. On Tuesday, the island's power company and union leaders said electricity failed for more than 450,000 customers when a plant was knocked offline for unknown reasons.

On Wednesday, the director of Puerto Rico's Electric Power Authority told WKAQ radio that he believed it was either sabotage or negligence: "It was done manually." However, the head of transmission and distribution disputed those comments and told Radio Isla that it was too soon to make any conclusions. Another outage occurred on Wednesday after a couple of transformers exploded in the capital of San Juan for unknown reasons, leaving more than 33,000 customers without power.

Meanwhile, the governor said that more than 300 shelters across the island were prepared to receive people if needed and that more than 130,000 face masks were available.

"We've lived through several emergencies at one time," Vázquez said. "I want you to remain calm."

On Wednesday afternoon, the storm system had maximum sustained winds of 45 mph (75 kph). It was centered 180 miles (285 kilometers)

south-southeast of San Juan, Puerto Rico, and was moving west-northwest at 23 mph (37 kph).

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