

In Irma's path, Haitians face storm's fury alone

6 September 2017, by Amelie Baron



Fishermen pull a net while fishing in Cap-Haitien, Haiti, where few have prepared for massive Hurricane Irma

Inhabitants of Shada, a poor riverside community in northern Haiti, were surprised to learn that a massive, potentially catastrophic hurricane is headed their way.

They are in mortal danger from Irma, now just hours away, but nobody had bothered to warn them.

"I didn't know a hurricane was coming, because we don't get electricity here, so we can't get the news," said Jacquie Pierre, pointing to a small television set covered with a placemat.

Since the start of the year, the 25-year-old's house has been flooded twice. The prospect of being hit by a Category Five storm, one packing 180 mile-an-hour (290 kilometer) winds, terrifies her.

"I am afraid, not just for my life or my children's, but for everyone, for every Haitian. We are like a family," she says, tightly hugging her three-year-old daughter.

Hearing this, her neighbor Pierre Valmy sticks his head out of his house, a rustic cabin built from wooden planks and metal sheeting.

"Often the water overflows and invades the whole area, but never before because of a hurricane," he said. "If you say a big hurricane is coming here, then it's the end of the world for us," he despaired, turning his gaze to the ground.



Haitians living on the Mapou River were surprised to learn that Hurricane Irma is headed their way

Lack of shelter

The US National Hurricane Center forecasts tropical storm conditions to begin on the north coast of Haiti on Wednesday night, escalating into full-blown hurricane conditions on Thursday.

On the outskirts of Cap-Haitien, Haiti's second largest city, the emergency operations center has yet to launch a public information campaign because they are still doing an inventory of available equipment and personnel.

A UN stabilization mission known as Minustah

ended in mid-October, and peacekeepers withdrew with the heavy equipment that had been used repeatedly in responding to seasonal floods in the Cap-Haitien region.

"We no longer have the support of Minustah and there aren't many NGOs involved in risk management in the department, which makes for a difficult situation," said Jean-Henri Petit, the technical coordinator for civil protection in Haiti's Department of the North, of which Cap-Haitien is the capital.

The department has more than a million people, but only three ambulances and not many more trucks to clear out garbage-choked gullies and drainage channels which will otherwise back up in a storm. At the [operations center](#), the dearth of emergency supplies is cruelly evident.

Even more worrisome is the lack of shelters, because 90 percent of the houses in Cap-Haitien have sheet metal roofing incapable of withstanding powerful winds.



A woman walks next to the Mapou River, in Shada neighborhood, in Cap-Haitien, in the north of Haiti, where hurricane preparations have been slow to get started

'No place to go'

"We have learned lessons from Matthew and we are going to direct people to shelters for their

protection," said Petit, referring to the Category Four storm that ravaged southern Haiti in October last year.

But as there are not enough shelters, the authorities intend to advise people that their best bet may be to take refuge with family or friends who have concrete houses.

On the banks of the Mapou river, residents left in the dark about Hurricane Irma's approach feel completely abandoned by the authorities.

"Now that I know a [hurricane](#) is approaching, I am going to put my important papers in a plastic sack and tie it to a roof beam because this is my only house and I have no place to go," said Valmy, pointing to a narrow beam that holds up the house where he lives with his wife and two children.

Aware that the polluted river that flows a few meters away could sweep him and his family away, Valmy is resigned to whatever may come.

"In life, we all have a place to die," he says, before leaving to play dominos with friends, briefly mentioning to them the prospect of "bad weather" to come.

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