

Hurricane Irma devastates Caribbean islands, turns paradises into nightmares

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St Lucia: Hurricane Irma snapped the Caribbean islands' links to the outside world by pounding their small airports, decapitating cellphone towers, filling harbors with overturned, crushed boats.

Damage in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma in Virgin Gorda's Leverick Bay

Strung like beads along the northeast edge of the Caribbean, the Leeward Islands are tiny, remote and beautiful, with azure waters and ocean breezes drawing tourists from around the world.

The wild isolation that made St Barts, St Martin, Anguilla and the Virgin Islands vacation paradises has turned them into cutoff, chaotic nightmares in the wake of Hurricane Irma, which left 22 people dead, mostly in the Leeward Islands. Looting and lawlessness were reported yesterday by both French and Dutch authorities, who were sending in extra troops to restore order.

The Category 5 storm snapped the islands' fragile links to the outside world with a direct hit early Wednesday, pounding their small airports, decapitating cellphone towers, filling harbors with overturned, crushed boats and leaving thousands of tourists and locals desperate to escape.

The situation worsened yesterday with the passage of Category 4 Hurricane Jose, which shuttered airports and halted emergency boat traffic through the weekend.

Looting, gunshots and a lack of clean drinking water were reported on the French Caribbean territory of St Martin, home to five-star resorts and a multimillion estate owned by President Donald Trump.

Federal officials deployed C-130s to evacuate US citizens from the French Caribbean island of St Martin to Puerto Rico. Nearly 160 were evacuated on Friday and approximately 700 more yesterday.

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The amphibious assault USS Wasp evacuated hospital patients from St Thomas in the Virgin Islands to St Croix and Puerto Rico. The Norwegian Cruise Line turned a cruise ship into an ad-hoc rescue boat, sending a ship with 10 restaurants, a spa and a casino to evacuate 2,000 tourists from St Thomas in the US Virgin Islands. The Norwegian Sky cruise ship was due to arrive Tuesday and take its charges to Miami.

More than 1,100 police, military officials and others were deployed to St. Martin and the nearby French Caribbean territory of St Barts, where they used helicopters to identify the cars of people looting stores and homes. French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe announced last night that France would be sending more Foreign Legion troops, paratroopers and other reinforcements to St Martin starting today.

Philippe said the several hundred gendarmes, soldiers and other security forces there were working in "difficult conditions" and needed help.

The government told all residents to stay inside and put the island and St Barts on its highest alert level as Hurricane Jose rolled through the area.

The island is divided between French St Martin and Dutch St. Maarten, where the Dutch government estimated yesterday that 70 percent of houses were badly damaged or destroyed, leaving much of the 40,000 population in public shelters as they braced for the arrival of Jose.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said the situation remained "grim" on the island where widespread looting had broken out and a state of emergency was in force.

Rutte said some 230 Dutch troops and police were patrolling St Maarten to maintain order and deliver aid and a further 200 would arrive in coming days. The government evacuated 65 dialysis patients from St. Maarten's hospital, which also was hard hit by Irma.

The islands' woes increased as the airport on St Barts was closed, and those in Anguilla and St. Martin were open only to the military, rescue crews and aid organizations. Others, including St Thomas in the US Virgin Islands, banned flyovers.

Late yesterday, St Maarten Prime Minister William Marlin said about 1,600 tourists had been evacuated and efforts are being made to move 1,200 more.

Marlin said many countries and people have offered help to St. Maarten, but authorities are waiting on the weather conditions to see how this can be coordinated.

Before the hurricanes, St Maarten's Princess Juliana International Airport was one of the former Dutch colony's major tourist draws thanks to a runway that ended just a few meters (yards) from the sandy crescent of Maho Beach, where people could stand and watch as arriving jets skimmed low over their heads.

After Irma, aerial footage shot by Dutch marines showed that Maho Beach's sands had washed away and the airport was badly damaged. The Dutch military are using the runway, which was inundated by high tides during the hurricane, to ferry in aid supplies but say it's not yet open to civilian flights as there are no runway lights or air traffic control.

The Canadian low-cost airline and tour agency Sunwing evacuated some Canadian tourists from St Maarten to Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic yesterday.

Ports in St John, St Thomas and elsewhere remained closed.

As Jose neared, the last airplane flew in to St Martin's battered Grande-Case airport Friday carrying workers to help re-establish the island's water supply and electricity. French authorities said some 1,105 recovery workers were deployed on St. Martin and St. Barts. A tanker with 350 tons of fresh water was also on its way.

By yesterday, damage was estimated to have already reached 1.2 billion euros (USD1.44 billion).

France said it hoped to allow commercial boats to go to and from St. Martin and nearby Guadeloupe on Monday, when waters are expected to calm.

French President Emmanuel Macron came under criticism for his government's handling of the crisis.

Once known for pink sandy beaches that attracted celebrities and royalty, the island of Barbuda is now a disaster zone. Virtually all of its 1,500 residents left for the sister island of Antigua, a 1.5-hour boat ride away, ahead of Jose with assistance from

"The biggest problem in Barbuda now is the fact that you have so many dead animals in the water and so on, that there is a threat of disease. You could put all the people back in Barbuda today ... but then you'll have a medical crisis on your hand," Foreign Affairs Minister Charles Fernandez said.

UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson announced a package of 42 million pounds (about \$55 million) for the relief effort in the British overseas territories of Anguilla, British Virgin Islands and Turks & Caicos "The UK government is doing everything it possibly can to help those affected by the hurricane," he said.

But Anguilla's former attorney general, Rupert Jones, criticized Britain's response to the disaster.

"It is an insufficient drop in the Caribbean ocean for islands subject to devastation and inhabited by its own citizens," he wrote in an email. "The rebuilding effort is bound to cost a vast amount more and it is hard to see this making a real difference to the three islands."

- AP