

Hurricane Isaias Lashes Bahamas as Florida Prepares

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Max Hall makes repairs to the roof of a home before the arrival of Hurricane Isaias in Freeport, Grand Bahama, Bahamas, Friday, July 31, 2020. Residents in Grand Bahama rushed to gas stations and food stores with a sense of urgency as Isaias moved through
By. AP PHOTO/TIM AYLEN

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — Forecasters declared a hurricane warning for parts of the Florida coast Friday as Hurricane Isaias drenched the Bahamas on a track for the U.S. East Coast.

Officials in Florida said they were closing beaches, marinas and parks in Miami-Dade County beginning Friday night. Mayor Carlos Giménez said the county had 20 evacuation centers on standby that could be set up with COVID-19 safety measures.

“We still don’t think there is a need to open shelters for this storm, but they are ready,” he said.

But authorities in North Carolina ordered the evacuation of Ocracoke Island, which was slammed by last year's Hurricane Dorian, starting Saturday evening. Meanwhile, officials in the Bahamas evacuated people in Abaco who have been living in temporary structures since Dorian as well as people living in the eastern end of Grand Bahama.

Isaias had maximum sustained winds of 75 mph (120 kph) Friday afternoon and was expected to strengthen during the night, the U.S. National Hurricane Center in Miami said. The storm was centered about 195 miles (320 kilometers) south-southeast of Nassau in the Bahamas and was moving northwest at 15 mph (24 kph).

The hurricane knocked shingles off roofs in the Bahamian island of San Salvador as it carved its way through an archipelago still recovering from Dorian's devastation. Bahamas Power and Light Co. cut off power in certain areas for safety.

Paula Miller, Mercy Corps director for the Bahamas, told The Associated Press that while the islands can normally withstand strong hurricanes, some have been destabilized by the coronavirus pandemic and the damage caused by Dorian.

"With everything not quite shored up, property not secured, home not prepared, even a Category 1 will be enough to set them back," she said.

The Hurricane Center said heavy rains associated with the storm "may begin to affect South and east-Central Florida beginning late Friday night, and the eastern Carolinas by early next week, potentially resulting in isolated flash and urban flooding, especially in low-lying and poorly drained areas."

A hurricane warning was in effect from Boca Raton, just north of Miami, about 150 miles north to the Volusia/Brevard County Line. A hurricane watch was in effect from the Volusia/Brevard County Line to the Flagler/Volusia County Line and from south of Boca Raton to Hallendale Beach.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said that the state was "fully prepared for this and any future storm during this hurricane season," with stockpiles of personal protective equipment, generators, bottled water and meals ready to be distributed.

But he urged people to have seven days worth of food, water and medication ready and said that state-run coronavirus testing sites in the areas where the storm could hit will be closed.

"Our sites, because they're outdoors with tents, if it were to get 40-, 50-mile-per-hour winds, it would just collapse," he said. "Safety is paramount for that."

Miami's mayor said that social-distancing measures prompted by COVID-19 meant each person in shelters needed to have 40 square feet and no more cafeteria-style dining would be allowed. People who are infected with the new coronavirus and need to evacuate will be isolated in classrooms separate them from the general population, Giménez said.

In Daytona Beach and Polk County, authorities began distributing sandbags and other officials advised people to have emergency provisions at home sufficient for three to seven days.

A hurricane warning was in effect for in the Bahamas for Andros Island, New Providence, Eleuthera, Abacos Islands, Berry Islands, Grand Bahama, Bimini, Acklins, Crooked Island, Long Cay, Mayaguana, Ragged Islands, Cat Island, the Exumas, Long Island, Rum Cay, and San

Salvador.

“Continue to hunker down,” said Trevor Basden, director of the Bahamas meteorology department.

Two of those islands, Abaco and Grand Bahama, were battered by Dorian, a Category 5 storm that hovered over the area for two days and killed at least 70 people, with more than 280 reported missing. People are still living in tents on both islands, and officials said crews were trying to remove leftover debris ahead of Isaias.

Prime Minister Hubert Minnis relaxed a coronavirus lockdown as a result of the impending storm, but imposed a 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew. He said supermarkets, pharmacies, gas stations and hardware stores would be allowed to be open as long as weather permitted.

The Bahamas has reported more than 570 confirmed COVID-19 cases and at least 14 deaths. It recently barred travelers from the U.S. following a surge in cases after it reopened to international tourism.

Given the pandemic, the prime minister urged young people to stay safe from the approaching storm to respect social distancing measures.

“Please do not engage in hurricane or COVID(-19) parties,” he said. “It can be devastating.”

On Thursday, while still a tropical storm, Isaias toppled trees, destroyed crops and caused widespread flooding and small landslides in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, where hundreds of thousands of people were left without power and water.

Officials reported that a man died in the Dominican Republic when he was electrocuted by a fallen electrical cable. More than 5,000 people were evacuated, and more than 130 communities remained cut off by floodwaters.

In Puerto Rico, the National Guard rescued at least 35 people from floodwaters that swept away one woman who remains missing.

Isaias was expected to produce 4 to 8 inches (10 to 20 centimeters) of rain in the Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

Associated Press writer Dánica Coto reported this story in San Juan and AP writer Adriana Gómez Licón reported from Miami.