

Hurricane Dean inflicts devastating blow to Caribbean agriculture, infrastructure

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Hurricane Dean swept through the Caribbean and into Mexico this week, killing at least 25 and causing extensive damage to homes and infrastructure. In addition to Mexico, the countries of Belize, Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, Dominica, St. Lucia, and other islands of the Lesser Antilles, were impacted by flooding and winds up to 256 kilometers per hour.

The storm passed through the Caribbean and made landfall in Mexico as a Category 5 storm. It was the most intense Atlantic hurricane to hit land since 1992, and the third-most intense Atlantic storm to hit land since the 1850s, when these figures were first recorded.

The storm weakened to Category 1 on August 21 as it moved over the Yucatan Peninsula and into the southern Gulf of Mexico, where it re-strengthened into a Category 2. After making a second landfall in central Mexico August 22, Dean weakened to a tropical storm and caused damage mainly in rural areas. The region remains vulnerable to flash flooding and mudslides from up to 20 inches of rain.

Most press reports have concentrated on the fate of Mexican oil installations and tourist hot spots throughout the region, which were spared all but the most minor damage as Dean skirted around major cities. As market analyst Donald Light put it to the Dow Jones *MarketWatch* on Tuesday, “That gentle breeze you feel this morning is the collective sigh of relief from the US insurance industry as it watches the current storm track of Hurricane Dean.”

Preliminary estimates put the economic cost at \$750 million to \$1.9 billion from the hurricane, figures that only account for insured property in the region.

However, insured property damage is only a fraction of the social cost of the storm. Details from some of the worst affected areas are scarce, but those that are available clearly illustrate the vulnerability of long-impooverished populations.

The Mexican government has yet to issue an official damage report for the Yucatan region, where thousands live in huts constructed of sticks and grass. However, an Associated Press report August 23 portrayed the mainly Mayan communities there in a state of ruin and virtual

abandonment by the government two days after landfall.

“Thousands of Mayan Indians lost homes as Hurricane Dean blew through the Yucatan peninsula,” the AP reported, “but their real wealth was the trees, now scattered and broken in the storm’s wake. Village after village is carpeted with fallen mangoes, oranges, guanabanas and mameys that will never be harvested.”

“If I just sit and wait until they help me, I’ll die waiting,” one resident told the AP. “If I wait, with my hand out, who’s going to give me food, and where am I going to cook it? I’d rather start working, first.”

“There isn’t even any corn to eat,” another survivor said, waiting in line for government trucks to arrive—which reportedly brought only bottled water and thick blankets.

In the state of Quintana Roo, where Dean first made landfall in Mexico, much of the impoverished Mayan population refused to evacuate out of distrust for the Mexican military. Cahetumal, the state’s low-lying capital and home to nearly 137,000, was flooded and left without electricity. Across the state, one million hectares (2.47 million acres) of crops were destroyed. The city of Carmen, situated between the coast and a lake, saw significant flooding that damaged hundreds of homes.

In the central Mexican states of Hidalgo and Veracruz, 50,000 people have been left isolated, two people were killed, and 250,000 hectares (617,750 acres) of crops were lost. Torrential rains in Mexico City continue to threaten parts of the city with flooding.

In Jamaica, where Dean was responsible for four deaths, entire neighborhoods have been blown apart and inundated with mud. Damage was particularly acute in poor neighborhoods, where houses are built of sheet metal, plywood scraps, and other makeshift materials. Many houses built after the island was devastated in 2004 by Hurricane Ivan were torn apart.

Despite the insecure housing construction, most Jamaicans remained in their homes rather than government emergency shelters, apparently out of fear of violence in the shelters—as happened in previous hurricanes. Three-quarters of the 1,000

shelters remained vacant throughout the storm.

Aid agency Oxfam estimates that as many as 300,000 Jamaicans have been displaced by Dean, and the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency estimates that anywhere from 15,000 to 60,000 families in Jamaica require immediate assistance with home repair, water, food and shelter. For its part, the Jamaican government—which, by comparison, puts the number of damaged houses at only 1,600—promised to distribute housing materials, bedding, and food to the first 600 people who visited the prime minister’s office.

Electricity remains out across the entire island, according to British-based Christian Aid workers in Jamaica, and downed cell towers have made communication difficult.

Roads are blocked by trees and other debris in Jamaica’s capital of Kingston, and some roads were washed out by sea sand, including the one connecting Kingston to its major airport. According to the National Solid Waste Management Authority, the agency’s road clean-up efforts are crippled by a shortage of trucks; for the entire island, the government has only 20 trucks.

Water shortages are a mounting problem in Jamaica’s residential areas. Public water distribution has been damaged, and hospitals are receiving priority trucking of water.

The agricultural sector of Jamaica, as throughout the Caribbean, has been all but destroyed. Bananas are a key export for the Caribbean, and replanting or repair of damaged trees will take several years.

Agriculture minister Roger Clarke stated that Dean destroyed all of Jamaica’s major export crops, and the growing areas of the south have suffered “major dislocation.” Clarke pointed not only to the physical destruction of farmland and the financial ruin of farmers and venders, but also to the growing reluctance of international financiers to reinsure and do business with the Caribbean.

Although Jamaica, along with 18 other Caribbean nations, signed on to a catastrophic risk insurance program introduced by the World Bank in February, bank officials stated that damages from Dean were not significant enough to trigger a payout. Officials declined to disclose what the minimum damage would have to be.

Likewise, on the national level, a special “Catastrophe Fund” established by the agriculture ministry was deemed by minister Clarke as “too young” to compensate for the disaster. Clarke suggested farmers work through local organizations to cope, rather than expecting government help in the event of catastrophic crop loss.

Haiti lost major portions of its banana, bean, and yam crops to wind and salt water on its southern coast. Government officials have yet to survey the area or pledge

aid. Christian Aid workers in Haiti report that drinking water and food—especially baby food—are badly needed, along with bedding, building materials, and agricultural supplies.

As one farmer explained in Monday’s *Miami Herald*, “They come, they take our names, but they never offer any help... Here we live on bananas; we have nothing else.... We are merely peasants.”

Nearly three-quarters of the Haitian population depends upon agriculture, which employs over two thirds of the nation’s labor force for extremely low wages. Largely as a result of US policy, the Haitian population is perpetually exposed to humanitarian crises.

Elsewhere, populations now face similarly disastrous situations. In Martinique, virtually all banana-growing operations and 70 percent of sugar cane plantations were destroyed, according to a French government assessment. The Martinique agriculture minister told the Associated Press that many farmers may decide not to replant, commenting, “They don’t know which saint to devote themselves to anymore.”

On nearby Guadeloupe Island, most banana plantations were also destroyed. Banana producers union president Eric de Lucy told France Info radio August 18, “There are considerable economic consequences for this sector because there is not a single banana plant left standing in Martinique and more than 80 percent of the banana plantations in Guadeloupe are affected.” De Lucy predicted production would not resume for seven months, and then only at half previous levels. An estimated 10,000 agricultural workers have been put out of work there.

St. Lucia prime minister Stephenson King described the agricultural devastation as permanent. “From what we have seen, farmers may have to start all over again as the last of the banana industry may have been wiped out.”



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