

Haiti devastated by hurricanes

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More than 500 have been left dead in Haiti after last Monday's landfall of Tropical Storm Hanna, according to conservative official estimates, and more than 650,000 Haitians are desperately in need of emergency aid. Hanna churned over Haiti for four days last week, wreaking destruction on the island's agriculture, fruit trees and shantytowns.

As of this writing, another, more powerful hurricane, the Category four Ike, and the still-forming Tropical Storm Josephine, are further threatening the Caribbean. Hurricane Ike hit Haiti's central agricultural region on Sunday with so much rain, according to initial Associated Press reports, that officials "said they had no choice but to open an overflowing dam in the Aribonite valley, inundating more homes and possibly causing lasting damage to Haiti's 'rice bowl,' a farming area whose revival is key to rescuing the starving country."

Ike is the fourth major storm to strike Haiti in less than a month, following six days after Hanna. Eight days before Hanna made landfall, Hurricane Gustav left scores dead—at least 77 in Haiti—in Hispaniola and left extensive flooding. A week before that, flooding and mudslides triggered by Tropical Storm Fay killed another 40 people in Haiti. Meteorologists warn that the soil is already so saturated that even if the subsequent storms track around Haiti, any further rainfall will have catastrophic consequences.

The storms have exacted an enormous toll because the country—the poorest in the Western hemisphere—already suffers immense social, political and humanitarian crises. Food and fuel inflation, particularly in the past year, has forced millions who live on less than \$1 a day to the brink of starvation. Fully 80 percent of the population must survive on less than \$2 a day; the vast majority depends upon agriculture for bare subsistence. Both physical and public health infrastructure are virtually nonexistent.

Gonaives, Haiti's third largest city with a population of 300,000, suffered catastrophic damage from Hanna. As of September 5, 495 bodies were discovered in floodwaters and mudflows in the port city, situated in the Artibonite valley floodplain.

The United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs warned that the death toll was "increasing hourly," and state officials urged survivors in surrounding areas to somehow evacuate. Some 48,000 Gonaives residents are crowded into emergency shelters and thousands of others remain on their rooftops. Press reports have indicated that other survivors have taken refuge in the mountains, carrying a few belongings with them.

Gonaives is especially vulnerable to mudslides and flooding because surrounding hillsides have been deforested, trees made into charcoal by the desperately poor. In 2004, Tropical Storm Jeanne caused flooding that killed 3,000 across Haiti—the vast majority in Gonaives.

After Hanna hit, three mountain rivers swelled with torrential rainfall to cut off the city's major connecting roads; according to aid workers, bridges both north and south of Gonaives were collapsed, cutting off rescue vehicles. On Sunday, Haiti's Agriculture Minister Joanas Gay told Radio Nationale that the Mirebalais Bridge, the last land route into the city, had collapsed into the floodwaters. Aerial footage of the region showed neighborhoods of aluminum and scrap plywood submerged to the rooftops in muddy waters.

International aid groups immediately promised aid to the region but for days very little was delivered. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, a locally stationed contingent of the UN from Argentina dispensed some 700 gallons of water and 2,000 food rations, according to *Miami Herald* reporter Jacqueline Charles September 5. The force evacuated only about 400 people. It was not until Thursday that an aid shipment of 20,000

rations of plastic sheeting, first aid kits, and water jugs, brought by the US Coast Guard, arrived in the capital.

On Friday, a boat carrying limited UN food rations and water docked in Gonaives, guarded by Argentine troops armed with assault rifles. According to a report by the British *Guardian*, UN workers distributed supplies to only 2,000 people in two shelters before suspending operations citing safety concerns.

Firsthand accounts depict scenes of horror and desperation. The AP reported that children, frantic with hunger, were running after the UN food trucks in knee-deep water, screaming “Hungry! Hungry!” In a local jail, abandoned inmates with “deep-set eyes, protruding ribs and labored breathing” told reporters they had not eaten for nearly a week.

The vast majority remains without food or potable water. Gonaives Senator Yuri Latortue told the press Saturday that some 200,000 people have had nothing to eat for days. “We can’t live in this situation,” Gonaives resident Baptiste Jean told Charles of the *Herald*. “We don’t have a country. We don’t have a president. The city is finished.”

Parnell Denis, the contact for Oxfam in Gonaives, told Agence France Presse Saturday that the city was “completely devastated.... The streets are lined with groups of people walking through the streets trying to find higher ground. Food supplies and water are scarce and the price of the food that’s left is rising. The morale of people staying in the shelters is so very low; I am afraid to tell them that another storm is on its way.”



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