

Hurricane threatens Haiti as cholera epidemic surges

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Some 1.5 million Haitians, still homeless after last January's devastating earthquake, are facing the combined deadly threats of an approaching hurricane and a rapidly spreading cholera epidemic.

Tropical Storm Tomas was set to hit Haiti with torrential rains and high winds by Friday morning. The storm is expected to dump between 5 and 10 inches of rain on the battered Caribbean nation—15 inches in some spots—while unleashing a storm surge of up to nine feet.

"These rains could cause life-threatening flash floods and mud slides over mountainous terrain," the National Hurricane Center in the US warned.

Tomas struck the eastern Caribbean last weekend, killing at least 14 people on the island of St. Lucia.

The storms, combined with the outbreak of the deadly epidemic, have further exposed how little has been done to provide relief to the Haitian people—much less reconstruct the country's devastated infrastructure—in the 10 months since the 7.0 quake claimed the lives of more than a quarter of a million people.

They have also laid bare the sharp class tensions within what has long been the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, characterized by one of the starkest social divides between the masses of people and a small wealthy elite.

Haiti's President Rene Preval went on national radio Thursday to issue a warning that only underscored the impotence of his government and the helplessness of the huge numbers of people left unprotected in the path of the storm.

"The government doesn't have the means to evacuate everyone. Please take precautions. Follow all instructions ... save your lives," he said. "There is a storm. It is coming."

The government has urged more than a million people still living in squalid tent camps to leave them for more secure structures. With the capital city of Port-au-Prince still devastated—more than 200,000 houses were damaged and barely 2 percent of the rubble has been cleared—this is hardly realistic. While the government claimed to have identified

some 1,000 havens for evacuees, most of them are too far away from the tent cities and the teeming slum community of Cite Soleil, which at sea level is extremely vulnerable to the rising waters and torrential rain.

"The situation is difficult, because getting people to move again is tricky," said Leonard Doyle, a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

While the government has called upon Haitians to leave threatened areas for safety, for the masses of homeless this is simply not possible, he said. "Humanitarian organizations are doing what they can, but with approximately 1.3 million Haitians homeless, the task before them is enormous ... for most of the displaced and those living in communities vulnerable to flooding, there are few good options."

Stefan Reynier, the head of mission for Doctors without Borders in the Haitian town of Leogane, 18 miles west of the capital, put it even more bluntly: "The majority of people have nowhere to go," he told the *Christian Science Monitor*. "Those people will not be protected."

Reynier added that, whatever the strength of the storm, "it will create a bad situation for people living, and good conditions for cholera spreading in the water with the bad sanitation, with the movement of population."

At a press conference on Wednesday, Haitian health officials announced that 442 people have died and more than 6,742 have been hospitalized with cholera, since the outbreak of the disease was first reported last month.

According to the director of the country's Department of Public Health, Jocelyne Pierre-Louis, 105 people had died just since last Saturday, and there had been a 40 percent spike in new cases.

The fear of aid agencies, already stretched to the limit by attempts to halt the spread of the disease, is that heavy rainfall will flood already precarious sanitary facilities, contaminating drinking water and creating conditions for a far more devastating epidemic.

The disease causes diarrhea and vomiting leading to dehydration and shock, which can kill those left untreated within 24 hours.

Meanwhile, researchers at the US Center for Disease Control have established that the strain of the deadly disease matches those found in South Asia and had never before been seen in the Western Hemisphere. The finding strengthened suspicions voiced by Haitians that the source of the cholera was a United Nations peacekeepers' base on the Artibonite River, where the outbreak began. The base is manned by a unit of Nepalese troops recently arrived in Haiti. Nepal has faced its own cholera outbreak in recent months. There have been angry demonstrations outside UN facilities and renewed demands for the withdrawal of the UN troops.

Reports from Haiti indicate that residents of the camps suspect that the authorities are using the coming storm as a pretext for evicting them from the city and fear that they will not be allowed to return.

The fear is well-founded as property owners have been moving in recent months to have the camps removed. Camp residents also suspect, justifiably, that plans for rebuilding Port-au-Prince being worked out between the Haitian financial elite and Bill Clinton, co-chair of the Interim Haiti Reconstruction Commission, do not include them.

At the Corail-Cesselesse, one of the largest camps on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, scuffles broke out and youth smashed the tables set up by aid workers seeking to organize an evacuation of the thousands living in tents there.

"We are upset because they have not told us where we are going," Domarcand Fenel, the head of a committee of camp residents, told the Reuters news agency. "People believe they want to expel us."

"People said: 'We've been displaced before. What's going to happen to us? Are we going to be able to get back?'" Bryant Castro, an American Refugee Committee official, told the Associated Press. "The tension is elevated. People are really concerned about their belongings. They're posing a lot of legitimate questions."

"I want to stay here," Jean Wilford, a camp resident in his 20s, told Agence France Press. "I am young, I can fight against the rains. I don't want to abandon the space where I live." said.

Natacha Jean, who also refused to evacuate the camp, said, "We're not leaving. No one can make us. We have been here for eight months, and we won't abandon our tent. Where would we go? I have a child and I want to stay here."

Others expressed resignation in the face of the coming storm, saying that there was nothing they could do to follow the government's advice to protect themselves.

"We don't have the means to leave or prepare for anything," Aecene Guerrier, a 39-year-old resident of the Place St. Pierre camp on a suburban hillside in Port-au-Prince, told the *Miami Herald*.

"Everybody is living in the streets, so where do they expect us to go?" asked Chantal Jean, a resident of the Cite Soleil slum. She told the *Herald*. "I don't have any family and friends to go to."

The lack of preparation for such a storm is criminal. Haiti has a long history of devastation from hurricanes and tropical storms, and the catastrophic effects that they would have upon a population left in appalling conditions under makeshift tents and tarps were entirely foreseeable. Indeed, for the bulk of the country's 10 million people, who live in extreme poverty, previous storms have proved deadly.

In 2008, a series of four storms claimed the lives of nearly 800 people, while leaving another 310 missing and 593 injured. The storms affected some 800,000 people and wiped out 70 percent of the country's crops.

Four years earlier, Hurricane Jeanne unleashed heavy rains on the country's northern mountains resulting in flooding that killed over 3,000 people, most of them in Gonaives, Haiti's fourth-largest city.

The immense loss of life caused by these storms, like that caused by the earthquake 10 months ago, cannot be attributed merely to a "natural disaster," but is the outcome of poverty and oppression bred by a century of US imperialist domination.

With other fuel supplies out of reach for most of the population, Haiti has depended upon charcoal from burned trees for at least 85 percent of its energy. The result has been a near total deforestation that has left the country's mountains bare, turning heavy rainfall into devastating floods.

That over a million people have been left homeless and defenseless in the face such a calamity today is the result of the failure of Washington, other governments and the major international financial institutions to make any significant aid available to Haiti.

The Obama administration has yet to provide one cent of the \$1.15 billion in reconstruction aid that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pledged last March. Of the \$5.3 billion pledged by all world governments for 2010-2011, less than 2 percent has actually reached Haiti.



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