

Hurricane Dorian devastates northern Bahamas, reaches Category 5

Our reporter
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Hurricane Dorian struck the northern Bahamas Sunday with catastrophic force and began to wheel northward, on a trajectory that is expected to carry it along the Atlantic Coast of the United States for hundreds of miles, raking parts of Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas.

The storm has the potential to be one of the most devastating in modern history. Its 185 mile per hour winds already mark it as the most powerful Atlantic Ocean hurricane in nearly 70 years. It is stronger than Hurricane Maria, which devastated Puerto Rico in 2017.

There are only preliminary reports of damage in the northern Bahamas because communications with the affected areas were disrupted by the giant storm. The US National Hurricane Center said that Dorian's eyewall had slowed considerably over the Bahamas, with a storm surge of 10 to 15 feet and rainfall above 24 inches.

Two major islands, Abaco and Grand Bahama, where Freeport is located, the second-largest city in the Bahamas with a population of 27,000, were directly in the path of the hurricane. Nassau, the capital city, is about 100 miles south of the eyewall, which struck Abaco at about 2 p.m. Sunday near the coastal town of Marsh Harbor. Eyewitness reports indicated that buildings in the town were under water.

Schools and government offices were closed and people in low-lying areas were asked to evacuate to one of the 24 shelters on the two islands. Government officials said that they expected as many as 73,000 people to be affected.

Grand Bahama is the flattest of the island chain, and nearly all its surface is at or below 10 feet above sea level. This means the entire island could be scoured by the storm surge driven by the hurricane's high winds.

At the same time, given the low elevation, the island will have virtually no effect in terms of disrupting the hurricane's circulation.

The Bahamas were hard hit by hurricanes Joaquin in 2015, Matthew in 2016 and Irma in 2017, each of which leveled buildings and flooded homes in different parts of the island chain, with 700 islands spread out over more than 100,000 square miles.

Hurricane forecasters now estimate that Dorian will begin turning to the right after it passes the Bahamas, following a trajectory familiar in previous storms like Hurricane Mathew in 2016, resembling a boomerang, moving north and then northeast along the US Atlantic Coast. Mandatory evacuation orders have been issued for much of the Florida, Georgia and South Carolina coast, particularly for residents of low-lying coastal areas, especially barrier islands.

The critical question is whether the storm turns sharply enough to remain offshore, sparing the coastline of the worst impact, or whether it actually reaches the US mainland in the course of the turn. The worst-case scenario would involve a protracted trek along the coastline, subjecting an area populated by nine million people to several days of hurricane-force winds, massive storm surges and torrential rains.

Tens of millions more people could be hit by the storm if it changes course unexpectedly, particularly if it moves directly west into the heavily populated regions of south and central Florida. Florida Power & Light has called in 18,000 workers from across the United States and Canada to work on the expected massive task of tackling power outages expected from Dorian's impact.

Thousands of flights to the southeastern United States have been cancelled, and gas stations reported running low on fuel supplies all along the coastal area.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) put on the usual show of intensive preparation from the obligatory visit by President Donald Trump, who canceled a scheduled trip to Poland, supposedly to oversee federal preparations. Trump was later seen on one of his golf courses in Virginia.

In one particularly ignorant remark, Trump claimed after a briefing from FEMA officials, “I’m not sure that I’ve ever even heard of a Category 5.” There have been at least three such disasters since he became president, Irma and Maria in 2017 and Michael in 2018.

Trump notoriously made light of the impact of Hurricane Maria, claiming that only 16 people had died when it hit Puerto Rico. The official death toll was later raised to 3,000, and there are estimates that the real toll was double that.



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