

Nations rush to help islands hit by Irma

By EVENS SANON AND DANICA COTO
Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — French, British and Dutch military authorities rushed aid to a devastated string of Caribbean islands Thursday after Hurricane Irma left at least 11 people dead and thousands homeless as it spun toward Florida for what could be a catastrophic blow this weekend.

Warships and planes were dispatched with food, water and troops after the fearsome Category 5 storm smashed homes, schools and roads, laying waste to some of the world's most beautiful and exclusive tourist destinations.

Hundreds of miles to the west, Florida braced for the onslaught, with forecasters warning that Irma could slam headlong into the Miami metropolitan area of 6 million people, punish the entire length of the state's Atlantic coast and move into Georgia and South Carolina.

More than a half-million people in Miami-Dade County were ordered to leave as Irma closed in with winds of 175 mph.

"Take it seriously, because this is the real deal," said Maj. Jeremy DeHart, a U.S. Air Force Reserve



This Sept. 6 photo shows storm damage in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma on the Caribbean island of St. Martin.

weather officer who flew through the eye of Irma at 10,000 feet.

The hurricane was still north of the Dominican Republic and Haiti on Thursday evening, sweeping the neighboring nations on Hispaniola island with high winds and rain while battering the Turks and Caicos islands on its other side.

Big waves smashed a dozen homes into rubble

in the Dominican fishing community of Nagua, but work crews said all the residents had left before the storm. Officials said 11,200 people in all had evacuated vulnerable areas, while 55,000 soldiers had been deployed to help the cleanup.

In Haiti, two people were injured by a falling tree, a national roadway was blocked by debris and roofs were torn from houses along

the northern coast but there were no immediate reports of deaths. Officials warned that could change as Irma continued to lash Haiti, where deforested hillsides are prone to devastating mudslides that have wiped out entire neighborhoods of precariously built homes in flood zones.

"We are vulnerable. We don't have any equipment to help the population," Josue Alusma, mayor of the

northern city of Port de Paix, said on Radio Zenith FM.

About a million people were without power in Puerto Rico after Irma side-swiped the island overnight, and nearly half the territory's hospitals were relying on generators. No injuries were reported.

The first islands hit by the storm were scenes of terrible destruction.

French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe said four people were confirmed dead and about 50 injured on the French side of St. Martin, an island split between Dutch and French control, where homes were splintered and road signs scattered by the fierce winds. The cafes and clothing shops of the picturesque seaside village of Marigot were submerged in brown floodwaters and people surveyed the wreckage from whatever shelter they could find. The toll could rise because rescue teams had yet to get a complete look at the damage.

At least four people were killed in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and officials said they expected to find more bodies. Authorities described the damage as catastrophic and said crews were struggling to reopen roads and restore power.

Israel strikes deep in Syria, said to hit military facility

BEIRUT (AP) — Israeli warplanes struck a military position near the Mediterranean coast in western Syria Thursday killing two soldiers, the Syrian army said, in a stronghold of President Bashar Assad that is also heavily protected by the Russians and Iranians.

The airstrike targeted a facility near the town of Masyaf, in Hama province, described by some as a missile producing factory, amid Israeli outrage over Iran's growing influence in the war-torn country.

Other reports suggested the facility was tied to Syria's chemical weapons program.

In a statement, the Syrian army said the Israeli warplanes fired several missiles from Lebanese air space, and warned of the "dangerous repercussions of such hostile acts on the security and stability of the region."

"We will do everything to prevent the existence of a Shiite corridor from Iran to Damascus," said Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who declined commenting directly on the strike in an interview with Israel's 100FM Radio Thursday.

New fires in empty Rohingya village challenge Myanmar claims

BANGKOK (AP) — Journalists saw new fires burning Thursday in a Myanmar village that had been abandoned by Rohingya Muslims, and pages ripped from Islamic texts that were left on the ground. That intensifies doubts about government claims that members of the persecuted minority have been destroying their own homes.

About two dozen journalists saw the fires in Gawdu Zara village in northern Rakhine state on a government-controlled trip.

About 164,000 Rohingya

from the area have fled across the border into Bangladesh in less than two weeks since Aug. 25, when Rohingya insurgents attacked police outposts in Gawdu Zara and several other villages, the U.N. refugee agency said Thursday.

The military has said nearly 400 people, mostly Rohingya, have died in clashes and that troops were conducting "clearance operations." It blames insurgents for setting the villages on fire, without offering proof.

Rohingya who have fled Myanmar, however, have described large-scale violence perpetrated by

Myanmar troops and Buddhist mobs — setting fire to their homes, spraying bullets indiscriminately, stabbing civilians and ordering them to abandon their homes or be killed.

On the Myanmar side of the border, reporters saw no Rohingya in any of the five destroyed villages they were allowed to tour Thursday, making it unlikely they could have been responsible for the new fires.

An ethnic Rakhine villager who emerged from the smoke said police and Rakhine Buddhists had set the fires. The villager ran

off before he could be asked anything else.

No police were seen in the village beyond those who were accompanying the journalists. But about 10 Rakhine men with machetes were seen there. They looked nervous and the only one who spoke said he had just arrived and did not know how the fires started.

Among the buildings on fire was a madrassa, an Islamic school. Copies of books with texts from the Quran, Islam's holy book, were torn up and thrown outside. A nearby mosque was not burned.



Houses are on fire in Gawdu Zara village, northern Rakhine state, Myanmar, Thursday. Journalists saw new fires burning Thursday in the Myanmar village that had been abandoned by Rohingya Muslims, and where pages from Islamic texts were seen ripped and left on the ground.

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