

# Hurricane Lenny bears down on U.S. Virgin Islands

CHRISTIANSTED, U.S. Virgin Islands (AP) — Hurricane Lenny's winds climbed to 150 mph yesterday after its leading gusts and rains ripped off roofs, hurled boats onto shore and flooded homes in the Caribbean islands as it roared toward the Virgin Islands.

St. Croix and the Virgin Islands were expected to bear the brunt of the storm's fury. Officials warned that the storm could spawn tornadoes and drench the islands with up to 15 inches of rain.

"My yard is completely flooded out, the telephone lines are whistling and the rain is beating against the house," Anthony Lewis of Frederiksted, St. Croix's second-largest town, said. He said he spent the morning bailing water out of his house.

Hundreds of tourists in the region were stranded as airlines canceled flights and airports closed.

Feeding off the warm Caribbean waters, Lenny's winds strengthened to 150 mph yesterday, making it a Category 4 hurricane capable of extreme damage. That is 5 mph short of a Category 5 — the highest.

The storm was about 35 miles southeast of St. Croix late yesterday afternoon, heading northeast at 9 mph. Hurricane winds extended 70 miles from its center and tropical storm-force winds another 205 miles.

Lenny's lateness in the season and easterly path left even experienced observers agape. "It's unheard of," veteran meteorologist John Toohy said on San Juan's WOSO-AM radio. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime event."

The storm's first winds cut power and telephone service to many St. Croix homes. It ripped up trees and debris that blocked roads, kicked up dangerous waves that battered the shore and carried a steady rain that

flooded extensive areas hours before the main impact was expected.

"All through the night, the police were busy helping evacuate a number of individuals who sought assistance after their mobile homes and homes in low-lying areas became threatened by flood waters," St. Croix police chief Novell Francis said.

Battering waves smashed over the 8-foot sea wall at Frederiksted, tore away the wooden fishermen's pier and a small part of the concrete Ann Abramson Pier where cruise ships dock.

A curious tourist who went out to experience the force of the storm was trapped by battering waves and clung to a rock outside a beach resort for more than an hour before divers rescued him, authorities said.

A half dozen people suffered fractures and other injuries when they were hit by

waves on St. Kitts' concrete pier. Storm surges in Grenada swept away four houses, washed away asphalt roads, damaged runway lights at the airport and flooded roads and the business district.

U.S. Virgin Islands Gov. Charles Turnbull declared a state of emergency Tuesday night, installed a curfew to prevent looting and deployed the National Guard. He also asked President Clinton to declare St. Croix a disaster area, making it eligible for federal emergency funds.

In San Juan, the Puerto Rican capital, a few motorists sped down highways usually choked with traffic and tooted their horns in delight after the storm passed.

Officials urged people to be vigilant, since most hurricane deaths occur after a storm passes. "These rains can produce life-threatening flash floods and mud slides," the National Weather Service warned.



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