

Caribbean braces for storm

Hurricane threatens Puerto Rico, other islands

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — Compact, quick-moving Debby became the first hurricane to make landfall this season, hitting several small Caribbean islands on a northwesterly route that menaced Puerto Rico and the Bahamas archipelago.

Forecasters said it was too early to gauge the threat to the U.S. mainland but urged residents to monitor the storm.

With winds up to 75 mph, Debby was a minor hurricane, apparently causing little damage on Antigua, Anguilla and other small islands Tuesday morning. It then made a slight — but crucial — turn to the north that meant populous Puerto Rico and the vulnerable Dominican Republic could be spared the worst.

"We've fared well. I'm looking outside at my garden, which was devastated by Hurricane Lenny last year, and it still has flowers," said Glen Holm, director of the tourism bureau on the Dutch island of Saba.

On nearby St. Maarten, battered by hurricanes in recent years, a curfew was lifted and meteorologist Ashford James celebrated the passage of "Little Debby."

Still, the threat was sufficient to disrupt life throughout the northern Caribbean as residents, tourists, businesses and authorities sprang into the routine — terrifying to

some, exhilarating to others — of bracing for a storm.

The U.S. Virgin Islands declared a curfew and requested federal help, and a major oil refinery was partially shut down. Airlines canceled flights, schools and banks closed, storekeepers nailed plywood to windows and cruise lines diverted ships.

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— Max Mayfield
director of the National Hurricane Center

The storm's center will likely approach Florida by Friday morning, Max Mayfield, director of the National Hurricane Center in Miami, told AP Network News. "If it stays on our track, we've got Wednesday and Thursday to prepare."

In Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory of 4 million people, there was relief at predictions Debby's eye would pass just north of the island, meaning a probability of lesser, tropical storm-force winds. Still, officials warned of life-threatening flash floods and mudslides.

"We're really concerned about Puerto Rico, always, just because of the high terrain they have down there," Mayfield said. "We're forecasting four to six inches (of rain), and they could have some locally heavier amounts up to 10 inches."

The U.S. Navy abandoned exercises near the outlying island of Vieques, moving 10 ships and two submarines 300 miles south.

At 2 p.m. EDT, Debby was cen-

tered about 55 miles northeast of San Juan after passing over the British Virgin Islands, moving west-northwest at 22 mph. Its maximum winds were 75 mph, with higher gusts. Hurricane-force winds extended outward 25 miles from the storm's center, and tropical storm-force winds another 175 miles.

Hurricane warnings were posted for the Turks and Caicos and the southeastern Bahamas, and a hurricane watch was in effect for the central Bahamas and northern Haiti.

The twin-island nation of St. Kitts and Nevis was spared, enabling the continuation of Carifesta, a 35-nation arts and music festival that began Thursday.

On the U.S. Virgin Island of St. Croix, HOVENSA, one of the largest oil refineries in the Western Hemisphere, shut down some processing units and was considering a complete shutdown, said spokesman Alex Moorhead.

The possibility that HOVENSA, with a refining capacity of 500,000 barrels per day, could suspend activity was being closely watched by investors who saw the price of oil futures shoot up Monday. The refinery is a joint venture between Hess Oil Virgin Islands Corp. and the Venezuelan PDVSA state oil company.

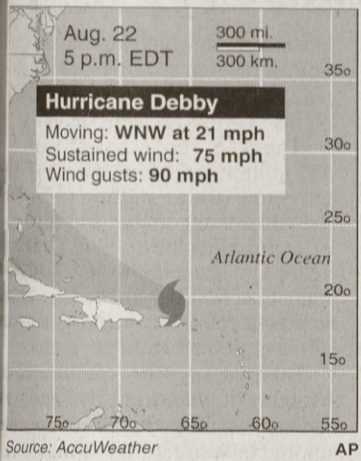
In Puerto Rico, tourists boarded early morning flights from San Juan for the U.S. mainland.

Lane Goldberg, 16, of Westport, Conn., was with a youth group trying to get home after working on community service projects in Tortola.

"It's been crazy, some kids were crying, kids were freaking out, parents were freaking out," Goldberg said. He was bumped from four flights at San Juan's airport.

Others were more relaxed.

"I hope it's over soon, because I need a suntan by Sunday," said Diana Chiquito of New York City, sunbathing on San Juan's Condado beach. Offshore, surfers enjoyed the higher waves.



Source: AccuWeather AP

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