

Susana Hurlich in Havana
Hurricane Paloma to hit Cuba today
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Hurricane Paloma - a bird's eye view (#2)
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Hola.

As those of you who are perhaps following Hurricane Paloma in the various weather sites available on Internet, you'll know that throughout the day, without stopping, it has been gradually and steadily strengthening. As of 8 tonight it was a category 3 hurricane, with sustained winds of 185 kph and a central pressure that has dropped to 962. It is still continuing its north-northeast movement, and is now moving at only 9 kph and very close to the southern shores of Grand Cayman.

As I mentioned earlier today, the eight provinces from Sancti Spiritus east to Guantanamo are in the Hurricane Alert phase. Tonight on the 8 o'clock news there were reports about preparations well underway in many of the provinces. From the heavy rains of Gustav and Ike some two months ago, dams everywhere are at least 80% and higher. Now the floodgates have been opened on many of them, so as to empty them a bit to accommodate more rains from Paloma. Emergency agricultural crews are harvesting some of the plantains that survived the two previous hurricanes so that more crops won't be lost. Some debris from the earlier hurricanes that hadn't yet been cleaned up is now being removed. Food supplies in the docks of Santiago de Cuba are being stored in safer areas. Students in semi-residential schools and residential schools have been sent home in many of the central and eastern provinces. And tonight details were given on all the media about the suspension of road and rail transport, as well as the suspension of all boats and ferries between the mainland and Isla de la Juventud as of tomorrow.

Hurricane Paloma is very unusual. The first information that we had about it - when it was still a low pressure area in the southwestern part of the Caribbean was on the 3rd of November. The next day, rains and electric storms, still unorganized, were taking place in the same area, with an indication that conditions were favourable for a tropical storm to develop. By the next day, it was a tropical depression, and when, early morning on the 6th, it became a tropical storm, it got its name. By the early evening, it was a category 1 hurricane.

Paloma. A gentle name. A dove. A symbol of peace. But very far from this.

It's a very rare kind of hurricane, coming up from the south, initially almost due north, as it's done during the past 36 hours or so. It's almost a perfect circle, with a very well-defined eye. Extremely well organized, but fortunately comparative small. You'll remember that the radius of Ike's tropical storms extended 335 km. With Paloma, the radius of tropical storm

winds is 120 km while its hurricane winds have a radius of 35 km. But that's still a lot for a long and skinny country like Cuba.

It's anticipated that by early morning tomorrow, Paloma will start to be felt in the central eastern provinces. In trying to think what this means, there are some important things to keep in mind:

First, Ciego de Avila (east) and Villa Clara (central), along with Matanzas (west), are the three provinces in the country which suffered the least damage to the agricultural crops from Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. During the past two months, agricultural work in these three provinces has been reinforced to help other more severely affected provinces and to contribute to making up for possible food shortages.

For instance, Ciego de Avila is an important provider of root crops to many parts of the country from Havana to the eastern provinces. After Ike, the planting of potatoes was accelerated in this province - the largest area in the last eight years - to help make up for losses elsewhere in the country. Some friends in Baracoa (Guantanamo) have told me that to the extent that they're getting any root crops and even vegetables at all is because they're being brought in from Ciego de Avila.

And now Ciego de Avila, along with Camaguey, are the two provinces where Paloma may very well make landfall, although we won't know for sure until tomorrow. But it's as if Paloma wants to make sure that the provinces that "got off lightly," so to speak, join the rest that were so badly punished two months ago.

And then there's Granma. Like so many parts of the country, its land base, especially in the mountainous areas along the southern coast, are still completely saturated. And the strongest rains of Paloma, coming from its eastern side, may very well strike this area hard.

We can never look at these weather systems in isolation from what's gone on before. Strong rains are forecast for tonight from Sancti Spiritus to Las Tunas, and for tomorrow, along the entire northern coast from Pinar del Rio to Santiago de Cuba. Where does the water go when dams are full? When the ground simply can't hold any more? What happens to fragile structures that may still be standing, without roofs, or partially repaired, when even category 1 winds hit? Everything has a limit. All we can hope is that the winds from the cold front coming down from the US will be strong enough to weaken, somewhat, Paloma. And, equally important, that its velocity will speed up. Hurricanes, no matter how strong, that move faster do less damage. Conversely, even a category 1 hurricane can do very serious damage if it's moving painfully slowly, or worse yet, just sitting still - as the infamous Hurricane Flora did for three days.

Tomorrow morning, on the popular Buenos Dias TV news plus program, we'll be getting fresh information. Jose Rubiera, the impressive head of Cuba's impressive Weather Forecast Department at the Meteorological Institute, will

no doubt be there telling us the latest information. He's considered a treasure in Cuba. People say that just hearing and seeing Rubiera, they feel more confident. More than a meteorologist giving the latest weather report, he's a professor, with an ability to explain the most complex weather phenomenon in ways that make it comprehensive - and educational - to all.

There's also another aspect about weather reporting in Cuba that's quite different from what we get in Canada or the US. When the Meteorological Institute sends out its weather reports - online - it also includes an up-to-date report from the Environmental Studies and Services Centre in Villa Clara Province. What they call Biometeorological Alerts that cover one week periods. In short, these include information about the possible health impact of upcoming weather systems. For instance, depending on the particular weather system, in a particular region of the country, there may be an anticipated increase, especially among more vulnerable sectors of the population, of acute respiratory infections, or cases of migraine or severe headache, or arterial hypertension, or hypoxia (oxygen depletion) - all ailments that are influenced by environmental as well as physical factors. During this period when Paloma is coming, between the 6th and 13th of November, there is an anticipation that in the western part of the country there may be light sensations of hyperoxia (an excess of oxygen in body tissues), with an anticipation that other kinds of physical reactions will progressively increase from the weekend on.

The hurricane season started on the 1st of June. It goes until the 30th of November. In our hurricane region, we've had 17 tropical storms, 16 tropical depressions, and, if I've counted them up correctly, nine hurricanes, not all of which have struck Cuba.

It's been a very busy season.

Abrazos para tod@s,
Susan Hurlich