

The U.S. Virgin Islands as of 5:00 p.m. today was placed under a hurricane watch by the National Hurricane Center, as Hurricane Maria -- less than two weeks after Hurricane Irma ravaged St. Thomas and St. John -- barrels towards the Leeward Islands, with the storm expected to impact the territory (with its most powerful winds predicted to impact St. Croix) as a category 1, 2, or 3 storm -- it depends on how fast the storm strengthens, according to Governor Kenneth Mapp, citing the National Weather Service.

The storm is now expected to start affecting the U.S. Virgin Islands late Tuesday afternoon and into the evening, with hurricane-force winds beginning at about midnight through Wednesday morning. And while the St. Thomas-St. John District may be spared the strongest winds according to the current forecast, the winds there are still projected to be at least at tropical storm-strength, along with torrential rainfall.

Mr. Mapp held his daily press conference at Government House today, and spoke in blunt terms about the potential impact of Maria. Speaking to residents in the St. Thomas-St. John District who may be planning on riding out the hurricane in their homes, Mr. Mapp's warning was dire: "I do not want to seem insensitive, but I want to make my point. If you believe you're going to stay in damaged buildings that have no walls and windows and shelter, through a hurricane, we're asking you to get a high-colored marker and write your social security number on your body." The governor has ordered the evacuation of the Tutu High Rise housing community, which was ruined by Irma. Adjutant General Deborah Howell said National Guard soldiers will be working to evacuate the remaining residents on Monday, and will station security at the compromised facility to protect the belongings of the evacuated residents.

Shelters

St. Thomas-St. John District

Lockhart Elementary School
BCB Middle School
Charlotte Amalie High School

St. John

Guy Benjamin in Coral Bay
Bethany Moravian Church (Julius Sprauve School in St. John is being evacuated)

St. Croix

Educational Complex
Canegata Ballpark facility
Herbert Grigg

Sandbag Distribution

Mr. Mapp said he signed a request on Saturday night that would pay for an additional 250,000 sandbags, an important purchase, as Maria, according to the N.H.C.'s 8:00 p.m. advisory, is expected to bring up to 20 inches of rain to the Leeward Islands.

Locations

- Department of Public Works in Anna's Hope, St. Croix (8:30 a.m.)
- Department of Public Works in Frederiksted, St. Croix (8:30 a.m.)

There will be no sandbag distribution in the St. Thomas-St. John District on Monday, according to the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency Director, Mona Barnes. The curfew through Monday in the St. Thomas-St. John District is 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. The extended hours will give residents an opportunity to take care of last-minute matters, the governor said Saturday.

There are mercy flights (free trips out of the territory to various hubs in the U.S.) leaving the U.S.V.I. tomorrow, according to Mr. Mapp. The airlines include Delta, United and Jetblue. The governor said residents interested in taking one of the flights out the territory should call 340-744-2244 for more information, although the Department of Tourism advised that there was a waiting list of 100 people and growing.

While Federal Emergency Management Agency teams will be stationed on all three islands during Maria's passage, F.E.M.A. will remove some of its personnel from the territory to locations not projected to be affected by the storm. Once Maria passes, all F.E.M.A. assets allocated to the territory will be back in full force, according to federal coordinating officer of FEMA Region II, William Vogel.

There will be no school for at least three days -- Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, according to the governor. Beyond that, Mr. Mapp said an assessment of Maria's potential damage must be conducted before a followup announcement relative to school is made.

At 8:00 p.m. Sunday, Maria's center was located by the French radar on Martinique near latitude 14.0 North, longitude 57.9 West. Maria is moving toward the west-northwest near 15 mph (24 km/h), and this motion with a decrease in forward speed is expected through Tuesday. On the forecast track, the center of Maria will move across the Leeward Islands Monday night and then over the extreme northeastern Caribbean Sea on Tuesday.

Maximum sustained winds have increased to near 80 mph (130 km/h) with higher gusts. Additional strengthening is forecast during the next 48 hours, and Maria could be near major hurricane intensity when it moves across the Leeward Islands Monday night. Hurricane-force winds extend outward up to 15 miles (30 km) from the center, and tropical-storm-force winds extend outward up to 105 miles (165 km). The estimated minimum central pressure is 982 mb (29.00 inches).

Hurricane watches and warnings:

A hurricane watch was issued for the U.S. Virgin Islands, the British Virgin Islands, Saba and St. Eustatius, St. Martin (Dutch and French), St. Barthelemy and Anguilla.

A hurricane warning was issued for Guadeloupe, Dominica, St. Kitts and Nevis, and Montserrat. A tropical storm warning is in effect for Barbados, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Wind: Hurricane conditions are first expected within portions of the Leeward Islands by Monday night, with tropical storm conditions beginning on Monday. Hurricane conditions are possible within the hurricane watch area by Tuesday, with tropical storm conditions possible Monday night. Tropical storm conditions are possible in the tropical storm watch area Monday or Monday night.

Rainfall: Maria is expected to produce total rain accumulations of 6 to 12 inches with isolated maximum amounts of 20 inches across the Leeward Islands, including Puerto Rico and the U.S. and British Virgin Islands through Wednesday night. Maria is also expected to produce total rain accumulations of 2 to 4 inches for the northern and central Windward Islands. In all the above areas, these rainfall amounts could cause life-threatening flash floods and mudslides.

Surf: Swells generated by Maria are affecting the Lesser Antilles. These swells are likely to cause life-threatening surf and rip current conditions.