

Hurricane Sandy Exposes Cuba's Crumbling Infrastructure

Author: [Reporters in Cuba](#)

"It's not looking good," official said as winds headed for shore.

The devastation caused by the hurricane that hit Cuba in the last week of October was made worse by the poor state of many buildings, according to eyewitnesses.

Hurricane Sandy was the worst natural disaster to strike Cuba in half a century.

As the hurricane raced towards shore, Lázaro Expósito Canto, head of the Provincial Defence Council in Santiago de Cuba, made a last-minute announcement on television and radio.

"It's not looking good. Citizens whose homes are in poor condition should take precautions and all necessary steps to avoid loss of life," he said.

By the time he issued this warning, it was too late for many people in Santiago de Cuba province to hear it, as the electricity had gone off.

After the hurricane raged overnight on October 25-26, preliminary estimates of the damage to property were reported in Cuba's youth newspaper *Juventud Rebelde* – over 4,200 homes had collapsed, 27,000 had lost their roofs entirely and 17,000 had damaged roofs.

These numbers were for the province excluding its main urban centre, also called Santiago de Cuba. The damage to this city, the second-largest after the capital Havana, was significant, and residents said the infrastructure was ill-prepared for the battering it received.

In the city's Chicharrones neighbourhood, which President Raúl Castro visited after the hurricane, housewife Marién described her frightening experience.

"In the middle of the night, the roof of my house was blown off by strong winds. Thanks to the support of a neighbour... I was evacuated along with my children, husband and other neighbours in the mist of the cyclone," she said. "By the morning, everything had been destroyed, houses flattened, and lots of people were crying as they'd lost everything they owned."

Another woman, Margot, who lives in the city's Antonio Maceo neighbourhood, believes casualties would have been much reduced if the authorities had "informed people properly" ahead of the hurricane, and provided places of shelter for "at least those people who had serious problems with their housing".

Before the winds hit, she said, "municipal workers didn't clean the drains to prevent flooding, and didn't cut down trees to prevent them... knocking down houses and obstructing roads".

Local observers reported cases of looting in the aftermath of the hurricane.

"The Ideal Marby market... in the city centre was ransacked because the shop windows were broken by tree branches," Margot said.

Another resident, Carlos Manuel Fuentes, described how the Hotel Bucanero was plundered.

"Many people had grown desperate because the town's storerooms had disappeared. They took advantage of the security guards and other hotel staff abandoning the flooded building, and invaded it to take provisions like ham, cheese and meat," he said, adding that he saw "computers, printers and other equipment buried in the sand, and people digging them out in hope of fixing them".

So far, the Cuban government has not said how much it will cost to revive areas affected by Sandy.

A spokesperson for the United Nations' World Food Programme, Elisabeth Byrs, described Hurricane Sandy as the "most devastating catastrophe Cuba has experienced in the last 50 years".

"A million people have been affected, representing ten per cent of the country's population," she said on November 6. WFP said food rations were needed for more than 500,000 Cubans.

This article is based on material provided by three journalists, who asked to remain anonymous.

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