

Two weeks of destruction and fear: Hurricane Irma is finally dead after 61 deaths

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Washington: Irma, which flattened some Caribbean islands and enveloped nearly all of Florida in its fury, no longer exists. The open Atlantic's most powerful hurricane on record finally sputtered out as an ordinary rainstorm over Ohio and Indiana.

A man carries a girl through floodwater caused by Hurricane Irma in Jacksonville

Irma's confirmed death toll is 61 and still rising, 38 in the Caribbean and 23 in the United States. In the U.S. alone, nearly 7 million people were told to evacuate, and 13 million Floridians were left without power in hot steamy weather.

This storm grew so immensely powerful over warmer-than-normal Atlantic water that it devastated the first islands in its path. Its gargantuan size — two Hurricane Andrews could fit inside it — spread so much fear that people all over the Florida peninsula upended their lives to flee.

“This was a large, extremely dangerous catastrophic hurricane,” National Hurricane Center spokesman and meteorologist Dennis Feltgen said Wednesday, when he declared the storm over.

Colorado State University hurricane researcher Phil Klotzbach put it simpler: “Irma was a beast.”

Irma generated as much accumulated energy in a dozen days as an entire six-month hurricane season would in an average year, Klotzbach calculated.

Just 30 hours after it became a tropical storm on Aug. 30, Irma was a major Category 3 hurricane. By Sept. 4 it had intensified into a Category 4, with 130 mph (210 kph) winds, and it wasn't near done.

It became a Category 5 storm the next day with top winds of 185 mph (nearly 300 kph), the highest ever recorded in the open Atlantic. Only one storm whirled faster — Hurricane Allen reached 190 mph (305 kph) in 1980 over the normally warm Gulf of Mexico — but Irma held its ferociously high speeds for 37 hours, a new global record for tropical cyclones. It beat Typhoon Haiyan, which also reached 185 mph (nearly 300 kph) before killing more than 6,000 people in the Philippines. Irma ultimately spent 78 hours as a Category 5, the longest in 85 years for Atlantic hurricanes.

Irma's entire path, from its birth off Africa to its death over the Ohio Valley, stayed within the cone of the probable track forecast by the National Hurricane Center.

Irma claimed its first victim when it was still far off, sending a “monster wave” to drown a teen-aged surfer in Barbados. Then it hit the Leeward Islands in full fury, sweeping a 2-year-old boy to his death after tearing the roof from his home.

Irma bullied through much of the Caribbean – Antigua, St. Martin, St. Barts, Anguilla, the U.S. and British Virgin Islands, Turks and Caicos, the Bahamas. It narrowly skirted Puerto Rico, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. It turned lush tropical playgrounds into blasted-out landscapes, littered with splintered lumber, crumpled sheet metal and shattered lives. In St. Martin, 15 people were killed.

Irma was still a Category 5 when it raked Cuba’s coast, the first hurricane that size to hit the storm-prone island since 1924. At least 10 people died there, despite massive evacuations. And by moving briefly over land, it may have spared Florida a tougher punch.

More importantly, the system slowed, delaying its turn north and steering its center over Florida’s west coast, which is less populated and less densely developed than the east. It also allowed dry air and high winds from the southwest to flow into Irma, taking a bite out of the storm and even tearing the southwest eyewall apart for a while.

Irma was more vulnerable, but by no means weak. A Category 4 storm with 130 (210 kph) winds when it slammed into Cudjoe Key, it tied for history’s seventh strongest hurricane to make U.S. landfall, based on its central pressure. With Harvey’s swamping of Texas, this is the first year two Category 4 storms hit the United States.

The Keys were devastated. Federal officials estimated that a quarter of the homes were destroyed, and hardly any escaped damage. Roofs seemed peeled off by can-openers; power poles were nowhere to be seen.

Irma was back over water as it closed in on mainland Florida, weakening still but spreading much wider – to more than 400 miles (640 kilometers) in girth – whipping the entire peninsula with winds of 39 mph (62 kph) or more. It pushed its highest storm surge, 10 feet (more than 3 meters), onto Florida’s southwestern coast, while causing some of its worst flooding in northeast Florida, Georgia and South Carolina, far from Irma’s center.

Irma’s second U.S. landfall was on Marco Island, near where Wilma hit in 2005. By then, Irma was a still-major Category 3, with 115 mph (185 kph) winds, but weakening fast. The worst of its fury somehow missed the Tampa Bay area, where homes were not nearly as flooded as those in faraway Jacksonville. Irma then sloshed through Georgia and Alabama as a tropical storm, blowing down tall trees and power lines, before dissipating Tuesday over Tennessee and Ohio.

- AP