

Hurricane Ike detailed updates from Havana September 7 to September 17

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(Update #7—Sent September 17)

Hola all:

The TV coverage here in Cuba on the impact of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike is very instructive, not just in showing clearly the extent of damages, but in giving a sense of the feelings and spirit of the people through many, many different testimonies. I notice that in much of the reporting outside the country, there's not much commentary on this aspect, which is as important - if not more so in the long run - as the statistics on damages.

One comment repeated over and over by men, women, old, young, often while standing in front of a pile of rubble that was once their home, often in tears, is that they know that their country, their Revolution, won't abandon them in their time of need. For instance, as of yesterday (Tuesday) noon, some 88% of the population was receiving electricity - in many areas by generators (part of Cuba's Energy Revolution as well as preparing for disasters - although many parts of Las Tunas, Holguin, Camaguey, Pinar del Rio and Isla de la Juventud are still with difficulties.

Yesterday, I was also struck by another comment made by an elderly gentleman in Holguin, I think it was, who said (on TV) that Cubans have long known how to help other people in need elsewhere in the world, and that he's confident that they won't hesitate to help each other in this great time of need.

And this is indeed what is happening. For example, in Havana, the entire city is in the process of being organized at the grassroots level to give people-to-people assistance to the provinces of Pinar del Rio and Provincia Habana, with different municipalities being "twinned" with designated areas in these two provinces. This is happening elsewhere in the country, with provinces and areas that are less affected helping those provinces and areas near them that are more affected. It's a "people's response" above and beyond the professional brigades of electricians, construction workers and others who are being sent from one area to another, and it's being done through the mass organizations such as the Committees in Defense of the Revolution (CDRs), the Cuban Women's Federation (FMC), zonal groups, residents' groups, etc.

Meetings are starting to take place at the circumscription levels, such as what happened Sunday night (14th) in La Ceiba, located along the Almendares River in the Puentes Grandes areas of Playa Municipality here in Havana. My friend Caridad, who lives there and who is a social worker and local community organizer, told me about the three different meetings that were held throughout the day, with three different circumscriptions. Some 60 to 70 people attended each meeting, with discussions ranging around the need for solidarity, the need for local clean up as quickly as possible, and the need to help others. The first task to be done was cleaning up the neighbourhoods of rubble and fallen branches. Some days earlier trucks and tractors had passed

through residential and other areas collecting the heavier debris, but there was still lots of leaves and smaller branches all over the place. After the clean up, a clothing drive will take place in La Ceiba (and elsewhere) organized by the Women's Federation. And today, Caridad told me that in the municipality of 10 de October, people are starting to organize donations of household goods for communities in the municipality of Alquizar, located in the central southwestern part of Provincia Habana.

In my own neighbourhood, Vedado, located in Plaza Municipality, we did the final clean-up on Sunday, and now we're waiting for notification of when the circumscriptions will be meeting.

It's small stuff, eh? The immense needs all over the country - some people being evacuated at the last moment because of flash floods in areas that don't traditionally flood, and having only the clothing on their back to show for the home they used to have - and the few things that any given Cuban family can turn over to others. Small stuff compared to the latest official statistics - still preliminary - that show over 444,000 houses affected of which over 63,000 are totally destroyed, over 4,000 tons (preliminary figures) of warehoused foodstuffs affected nationwide - not including destruction of crops in the fields and significant losses in poultry rearing, with hundreds of thousands of animals literally gone with the wind (!), and damages to electricity, water systems, in short, the entire infrastructure of the country including schools, clinics, hospitals. Just imagine an entire country hit by Katrina from one end to the other and you'll get an idea of the devastation! Preliminary estimates by Cuba is that losses are in the range of \$5 billion.

And Cuba itself has said, very clearly, that its own reserves won't begin to cover the country's needs for recuperation and reconstruction, let alone for feeding the population in the short term. That's another point, by the way, that should be kept in mind: inside the country we're being kept very informed about the situation. We know what kinds of reserves Cuba has and how they're used, as well as the decision-making process for their distribution. We know the extent of damages, which are updated every time we turn on the TV and/or radio or read the newspaper. We know about the assistance that's already coming into the country and where it's going, and about which I won't say much here as I know there's lots of information about this available in the international media. We know about the "offers" from the US, first of a paltry \$100,000 and then of \$5 million, and why Cuba has said a categorical NO as it's not aid but "aid with strings", that is, the US will only give it if Cuba accepts a US inspection team - something which no other country or organization in the world makes as a condition to hurricane assistance. (Plus Cuba has its own proven capacity to make its own assessments.)

So it seems like small stuff when one talks about neighbourhood clothing drives and cooking utensils drives and so forth. Except that it's NOT small stuff, as this kind of mobilization within the country is what shows, more than anything else, the spirit and determination of the Cuban people to not only survive, but to eventually surpass the very difficult blow that the country has received.

For the past week, or rather since the weather has calmed down and turned once again to hot and clear days and we're starting to get the full dimension of the terrible damage that has been done

to Cuba by two back-to-back category 4 hurricanes, I've been thinking about numbers. Here in Cuba. In Haiti. In Jamaica. In the Dominican Republic. In Galveston.

Numbers. Statistics. Percentages. They can be overwhelming. They can be so overwhelming that they can sometimes, without our wanting it to happen, distance us from the very human face of the disaster. It's a normal reaction. It's a self-protective reaction.

But if we distance ourselves from the very human face of calamity, we also distance ourselves from the very human face of what people are doing to try to recover from such great losses. Ultimately, we distance ourselves from ourselves.

We must also always remember that what we are seeing in Cuba or Haiti or Galveston or anywhere else in the world is directly related to the damage that is being done to the planetary environment, to climate change. Just looking at where I live and work, Cuba, there's no question but that hurricanes have become more frequent and more intense in the past decade. People living along the eastern and Gulf coasts of the United States know this as well. The world's ecosystem has been damaged and is screaming out its pain in hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, inundations, Arctic meltdowns...

It's large, isn't it - the problem that faces us. It's overwhelming too, the dimension of the task. But it's also imperative that we see, and talk about, and mobilize around, the crisis not just here in Cuba, but the worldwide crisis that is affecting us all.

But now, to return more directly to Cuba: I see the damage. I hear the numbers. And I try to humanize it, to feel the human face behind the numbers. Because today it's Jorge and Anabela and Luisa in Baracoa and Pinar del Rio and the Isla, but tomorrow it can as easily be George or Elizabeth or Steven in Toronto or Winnipeg or New York or San Francisco.

I'd like to tell you a few individual stories.

As mentioned above, over 63,000 houses have been completely destroyed, meaning at least 200,000 people homeless. One of these houses belonged to the daughter, Yannara, of a very dear friend on mine in Baracoa, on the northern coast of Guantanamo province and one of the first areas affected by Ike. Yannara is 27-years-old and is in her fourth year of socio-cultural studies. Her husband Giomanis is 29-years old and works in a state structure repairing computers. They have two small daughters, eight-month-old Ingrid and two-year-old Isabel (known as Isabelita since she was born). They lived in a simple house located behind Hotel La Rusa - for those of you who know Baracoa - about a block and a half from the Malecon or seawall. After Ike, only the front wall remained of their house, and all the other houses between them and the Malecon were also destroyed. The only things Yannara and Giomanis were able to salvage from the rubble is some clothing, a couple of fans, four chairs (but the table was lost). Everything else disappeared: the air conditioner, all kitchen pots and pans and utensils, all bathroom fixtures, etc. Even the fridge was carried away by ocean swells, etc. The day after Ike passed, two government commissions came by, the first to make note of damages and destruction to houses, and the second to make note of what people lost from inside their homes. Yannara and her family are now temporarily crowded into her parent's home. Others without immediate family in Baracoa

have been taken to evacuation centres in the area. Nuns from the local Catholic Church gave out some detergent, tooth brushes and toothpaste to people who were affected. Yannara says that the agricultural markets are largely empty and that some people who have small farms on the outskirts of Baracoa are walking around selling tomatoes and onions and a few other things. The government is already distributing doors and windows to people who had lesser damages to their houses, and roofing sheets have also arrived. Inbetween her tears she kept saying "but we'll come out of this, we're already getting assistance," This was the situation as of last Sunday (14th).

Multiply this story by 200,000.

Another friend in Baracoa, 78-year-old Cuca, didn't suffer damage to her house. But the five-hectare family farm in Maisi, which in addition to growing coffee for the state is also a source of fruit and vegetables and meat for the extended family, was seriously damaged. All the coffee plants were knocked down as well as many of the large fruit trees that shaded the coffee plants. She says that everyone in that area has similar losses. Then she paused for a moment on the phone, and said "There is the United States it's individual, but here at least everyone helps each other. People share the little bit of kerosene or alcohol that they have for cooking, and we also share our food so that no one goes hungry while we're trying to get back to normal."

The culture of collectivism. I've talked about this before. It's another thing that helps Cubans get through tough times like this - and there's nothing "little" about it! No one needs to make "individual claims" to private insurance companies. They're in it together. And so is the state.

And a final story I'd like to share with you, this one from beautiful Vinales in the province of Pinar del Rio. Last weekend I got a call from my dear friend Jesus. An extraordinary man. He's a poet, artist and researcher - as well as a member of the Municipal Historical Commission - who, motivated by his love of nature, has dedicated the past 40 years of his life to investigating fossils, animal life and medicinal plants throughout the Vinales valley area. Alongside his home, located just a stone's throw (baseball throw?) from the local Baseball Stadium, he has developed a wonderful, magical garden where he displays endemic plants and fossils that he's collected from all around the area, and where the entry is "guarded" by a three-metre-high cement baby Tyrannosaurus rex. Locally known as the Parque Prehistorico de Referencia National, some years ago his garden was declared a National Reference Site by the Ministry of Agriculture as a model of a creative way to use a small bit of land surrounding one's home. His garden is regularly visited by students, researchers, UNESCO and European Union representatives and interested Cubans and international tourists.

Then came first Gustav and then Ike, and Vinales was without electricity for over two weeks. I tried calling Jesus but couldn't get through, as his phone goes on and off with the electrical supply. Finally, the rains stopped and some small generators were brought in, giving people at least some electricity during the day. It's still not constant as the generators can't meet the full-time needs of everyone at the same time. So it rotates. Jesus lots of zinc roofing sheet on half of his house. His daughter Luisa who lives next door lose her entire roof. During the cycles, while Jesus was trying to save the plants, the family was trying to keep the house in one piece, as there was lots of water entry through the window shutters and doors. All the large trees - avocado, mango, other fruit and ornamental - were lost, but some of the smaller plants managed to

survive. The damage inventory commission has already been by, but it'll take years for Jesus to get his garden back to what it was.

Which brings me to another face of the crisis which we must also keep in mind. In addition to seriously damaging a built infrastructure, a hurricane also damages dreams, rather, the realized efforts of making dreams a reality. For me, Jesus's garden is a perfect example of this. As Luisa said, if Jesus were going through this alone, he would be as devastated as his garden. But he's not. He's already making plans for replanting while they wait for the new roof for his daughter's house and some construction assistance for his own.

This - the spiritual and psychological impact of the destruction - is one of the reasons that well-known Cuban singers, troubadours, musicians, comic groups and actors / actresses have been going around to the cities and small towns that have suffered the greatest devastation. When they arrive, the people, who have been informed beforehand, are already waiting for them. Performances are given to one and all, with the artists spending a full day in each location they visit. While these performances don't solve the serious material situation in which hundreds of thousands of cubans find themselves, they provide a kind of spiritual help, and are yet another concrete reminder to those living in remote areas that they're not forgotten.

Again, an apparently small thing. And yet resistance and reconstruction - indeed the Cuban Revolution itself - has been made by seemingly small things repeated over and over again. Because, at the end of the day, it's only with the energies and willingness of the people themselves that, as Jose Martí said, the impossible becomes possible!

Abrazos para tod@s,
Susan Hurlich

(#6 - sent Sept 10th)

Hola all:

Cuba has been, and continues to be, devastated by Hurricane Ike.

The only thing, and without question the most important thing, that hasn't been devastated is the will and determination of the Cuban people to surpass this disaster and go forward.

There's lots of information circulating in the international press about the extent of damages. But there are perhaps a few things that haven't, and it's these I want to briefly mention to give you an idea of the extent of damages.

There's not one province that has gotten off easy. More destruction, less destruction - but all fourteen provinces and the special municipality of Isla de la Juventud have suffered from

Hurricane Ike. And some have suffered a double impact, especially Pinar del Rio, which is still - as I write this - under Alarma Ciclonica (Hurricane Alarm) due to the intense rains and tropical storm winds that are still hitting the province. All of the province's 14 municipalities are suffering, but the two municipalities of Los Palacios (south) and Las Palmas (north) have taken the brunt of both Gustav and Ike.

The eye of Ike has left Cuba, but the body is still kicking strong. Imagine: as of about 4pm, it's slowly growing in size and intensity. Sustained winds of 150 kph. Still category 1 but category 2 starts at 154 kph sustained winds. Its bands of tropical storm winds and rains extend 335 km (radius) covering all of Pinar del Rio with rains reaching to the western part of Camaguey province in central Cuba. And we're being told to brace for another 12-24 hours of rains. In Habana, we're still getting occasional gusts up to over 80 kph. All western coastal areas have been evacuated due to inundations. Last night, for instance, ocean waters penetrated two km inland in the Batabano area, on the central southern coast of Provincia Habana.

Lots of "firsts", but for which no one will get a ribbon:

As of 4:30 yesterday afternoon, over 2.5 million people - or almost 21 percent of the country's population of some 12 million - have been evacuated. And the number is slowly growing, as rivers that have never flooded before leave their banks, fattened by torrential rains, and dams that are full and spilling over contribute even more to the flooding. 2.5 million! In the 17 years I've been in Cuba, including through many hurricanes, I don't remember that many people ever being evacuated before. That's an immense undertaking involving organization, coordination and cooperation. Significantly, over two million of these people were able to get shelter in the homes of family and friends, yet another indication of the incredible solidarity that is an everyday functioning part of Cuban society.

The damage to food crops as well as export crops is extensive. In Villa Clara, some 70% of plantains - all kinds - have been knocked down, with maize, papaya and yuca also seriously affected. In Holguin, plantain, yuca, vegetables and beans have been affected. In Santiago de Cuba, damages to plantain, yuca, maize, plus sugar cane has been burned by the winds. Lots of coffee beans have fallen off trees and, weather permitting, they'll try to save what they can. In Ciego de Avila, a strong producer of plantains for the entire country, the greatest damage has occurred in the agricultural sector, in particular - but not only - to the plantain crops. In Cienfuegos, plantain and sweet potato are affected, as well as vegetables and citrus such as grapefruit and orange. The one crop that hasn't been affected is malanga - a tuber kind of like potato. And they're trying to recuperate coffee beans that have fallen on the ground in the Escambray Mountains. The same in Baracoa and Maisi, both in Guantanamo, which are key (actually, the main) coffee-producing areas in Cuba.

Housing has been seriously affected everywhere. For example, preliminary reports from Holguin indicate that over 150,000 houses have been affected, of which 37,000 have been totally destroyed. The province of Las Tunas says that nothing like Ike has ever hit the province during the last fifty years. In some municipalities, 80% of the housing stock has been affected. I can't even begin to estimate how many hundreds of thousands of houses have been either damaged or destroyed on a national scale! The final numbers are bound to be high.

And the rains! That's the most serious part of Ike right now, even more than the winds. In the Escambray, over 500 mm has fallen in some areas. Some communities are still incomunicado due to roads blocked with trees. But before Ike arrived, experienced personnel, including health specialists, had been sent to these mountain communities, along with additional food stocks, in anticipation of such problems, as Hurricane Fay, which affected Cienfuegos just before Gustav, had already affected electricity networks in the Escambray. The beautiful area of Las Terrazas, in Pinar del Rio - which many of you have no doubt visited, got over 400 mm of rain in the last 24 hours, as have many other areas in the province - and elsewhere in the country. Pinar is completely without electricity. Vinales and many other areas are completely incomunicado. To the impact of Gustav is being added the impact of Ike. Some people in Pinar del Rio were even asking if Ike is returning, as they're without communication or up-to-date access to information and the rains seem worse than before!

Everywhere in the country, dams are full and overflowing, causing inundations - still - in low zones, which are fully evacuated. In Las Tunas, before Ike passed, the province was experiencing a drought, with dams only 50% full. Now, all dams are spilling over. A first: the Bulgara Dam in Camaguey, built 22 years old, has NEVER been full, but now, after Ike, it's full and spilling for the first time since it was constructed. And this story is repeated everywhere.

Also, for the first time since it was built, the carretera central, Cuba's main central highway, has flooded. For those of you who know Cuba, the flooding covers a 3.5 km length at Aguada de Pasajeros, where the central highway - that is the main road link between west and east, crosses with the main highway from Cienfuegos in the south to Matanzas in northwest, is so full of water that all traffic has been stopped, and it's anticipated that it'll be closed for at least three or so days. This has never happened before and the images are impressive! Flooding has been caused by overflowing rivers in the area, that have never flooded like this before now.

One bit of very good news, though, to come out of Cienfuegos is that the new "more hurricane proof" houses that were built to replace coastal settlements that had been completely demolished by Hurricane Dennis (2005) were able to withstand Ike. This is very good news indeed!

Jose Rubiera, the head of Cuba's weather forecast department, was asked if Cuba has ever had a hurricane that has touched every part of the country as has Ike. He replied that Hurricane Dennis (2005) entered Granma and then blasted up the centre of Cuba, but that the eastern part of Cuba has never had a hurricane as strong as Ike. Flora (1963) also affected a great part of Cuba, especially the east, but it was more rain than wind - unlike Ike which has been both plus heavy coastal inundations.

Assistance is coming from everywhere, both inside and outside the country. Examples: Santiago de Cuba has sent brigades to help Baracoa and Holguin. Camaguey, which has brigades in Pinar del Rio who went there after Gustav, has told those brigades to stay put and continue to help reconstruction efforts in that sister province. Camaguey, which has gone at least 25 years without being hit by a hurricane of this magnitude and which says they don't have the same experience confronting them as does Pinar, has reached out a very substantial hand of solidarity to los pinarenos.

And from overseas. You already know about the assistance from Russia: food, huge tents, construction materials. And \$500,000 from poor little Timor Leste. Mexico is offering aid in housing and electricity. Uruguay is making a call to the international community to help Cuba with foods, medicines and construction materials. Brazil is putting together an interministerial Assistance Group to help both Cuba and Haiti. After Gustav, solidarity and offers of help were already coming from China, Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, Spain, Brazil Mexico, Guatemala, the Cayman Islands, Peru, Santa Lucia, etc.

Cuba, that has the will and determination, will indeed need a great deal of material assistance for their reconstruction efforts. As Cubans themselves, as well as the authorities, no corner within the country is too isolated, no loss too great, to not get the necessary response. Tonight, on Mesa Redonda (Round Table) on TV, we'll be getting more detailed information about the extent of damages in the different provinces. They're still preliminary, since there are still so many areas incomunicado. But information is already coming in.

I started this email at 1:30pm. It's now 4pm. At 1:30pm, my area finally got electricity back. But many parts of the city are still without electricity. Calle 23, that main street in Vedado, has lots of tree limbs down and lots and lots of electrical wires. We're still having high gusts of wind. It's too dangerous for linemen to go up the posts, so full repairs will still take a while. Then, at 2:30pm - only one hour to try to get my fridge cold again so that food won't spoil (everyone has this same concern) - a torrential storm began. Lightning and very loud thunder. I had to shut down the computer as my dining room window was leaking terribly because of the angle of the rain and the force with which it was falling. My two kitties, Mariposa and Luisito, were terrified! The electricity has gone out again and I'm finishing this up and sending it out on battery. So once again, I don't know when I'll be sending the next one. It's important that you know, though, that whereas Ike's eye has left, we're still very much under the winds and rains of this hurricane. It's immense!

Oh!!! The energy has just come back on - at least in this area! Not sure for how long nor how stable, but I'm powering up my computer again! Until the next heavy downpour, that is...

For those of you who are circulating these updates to various lists, it would be helpful for me to know if you'd still like me to continue sending them out - which I'm very willing to do - and, if so, what kinds of things you'd find of most interest and use for me to try to cover.

One thing that Hurricane Ike has been unfortunately shadowing - and it's important that we make sure it too gets some visibility, are the Paralympic Games in Beijing. Cuba is doing great! To date, four golds, two silvers and four bronzes. And setting world records, such as in the 100-metre women's run and the 400-metre men's run. And when these impressive young men and women are asked to whom they dedicate their medals, they don't hesitate: all respond "To Fidel, to Raul, to my mother, my family, my community, and to the people of Cuba who are bravely battling the hurricane!"

Saludos a todos/as, Susan Hurlich

(#5 - sent Sept 9th)

Hola all:

As you can see, since this update is "on battery", the city of Habana is without electricity. This will be my last update until after Ike passes and electricity is reestablished.

As those of you who are hurricane and Cuba watchers know, Ike entered the west of Cuba - the Occidente - just past 10 this morning, on the border between Pinar del Rio and Provincia Habana. And it's anticipated that it'll leave northern Cuba sometime between 3-4pm in the municipality of Manuel Sanguily. For those of you who are following this on maps, Manuel Sanguily is northeast of the city of Pinar del Rio, with the lovely tourist area of Cayo Levisa just immediately north.

Ike is still a category 1 hurricane. Here in Havana, gusts of over 90 kph were already being recorded about 10 last night. The biggest danger that Ike brings to this part of the country is its winds, torrential rains and especially coastal inundations. The fact that it's WEST of Habana is good news for Habana, because although we'll get increasingly heavy winds and rains as the day (and into the night) progresses, we won't get as much flooding as we would have if Ike were passing east of the city. This is because since a hurricane's movement is counterclockwise, the strongest flood-causing winds are when the wind comes around from the bottom of the hurricane and hits the coastline to the left of the eye. But there are still parts of the Havana coastline, such as Miramar, coastal Marianao, etc. which will get inundated.

Even once the eye enters the Gulf of Mexico, because Ike is so large, the Occidente will continue to get winds and rains long after it leaves Cuban territory. Even now, while it's in Occidente, it's still raining in the central provinces: Villa Clara, Cienfuegos, Sancti Spiritus. And the accumulation of the rains is huge: in a 24-hour period, 300 mm in parts of Sancti Spiritus, over 160 mm in parts of Villa Clara and Cienfuegos. I don't remember if I mentioned in one of my previous updates that it was over 400 mm in parts of Guantanamo and Santiago de Cuba.

As for the destructive capacity of Ike, as Jose Rubiera - Cuba's brilliant, articulate, highly popular and "if Rubiera said it, it must be true" meteorologist, with the gift of turning all his weather reports into mini-universities for the population - ,when a hurricane increases by one category, there is a four-fold geometric increase in its destructive capacity (especially of the winds). Gustav entered Cuba as a category 4 hurricane. Ike is now a category 1 hurricane. This means that Gustav was 16 times more destructive than Ike at the moment. This is, of course, good news for the Occidente. As Rubiera says "Ike no es ninguna sombra de que fue Gustav" - "Ike isn't any kind of shadow to what Gustav was..."

But it's still a hurricane. And it'll still do damage.

What it's already done is horrendous. Even without having quantified details of the extent of damages - some areas where it's already passed are still incomunicado and/or inaccessible due to flooded rivers and fallen trees blocking roads - what we DO know is sobering. For example, this morning I got a call from a friend whose mother, sister and one-year-old niece live in Mayari Abajo on the northern coast of Holguin. For those of you who like to locate things on maps, you may not find Mayari Abajo noted as it's so tiny, but it's located between Nicaro and Guatemala, near the mouth of the Mayari River, on the western side of Bahia de Nipe. The houses are old in many of these communities, which date back to the 18th or 19th century. Almost all houses have either been totally or partially destroyed, losing their roofs if nothing else. The same thing in tiny communities like Antiga, also on the northern coast of Holguin. Some people from these areas - and don't forget, it was the northern coast of Holguin that took the force of Ike's entry into Cuba - are saying that the material destruction of Ike is much worse than what happened under Hurricane Flora back in October 1963.

To give you an idea of what this comment means, because while Flora is an important post-1959 reference for just how bad a hurricane can get - Cuba's Civil Defense started to get organized during this catastrophe - one doesn't often hear people say "this hurricane is worse than Flora". A category 3 hurricane that swept through the eastern part of Cuba, it was the monstrous rains and inundations of Flora that left over 1,000 dead in its wake and accumulated rains of over 1,200 mm. And the material damage was horrible. So to hear Cubans from areas such as Mayari Abajo or Antiga make these kinds of comments is also another indicator of just serious the situation is. The material destruction has been / is being massive and brutal!

And, as you know, there are at least four recorded deaths. Hopefully the number won't rise, but there is concern as we still don't know what's happening in a number of isolated areas that can't yet be reached since the passage of Ike.

Here in Habana, the rains and winds are steadily increasing in intensity. In my neighbourhood, in Vedado, every now and then you can hear something metallic or solid being swept along the street, or hitting the side of a building. Something that has no doubt been swept from the top of someone's roof. Even a broom stick can become a deadly lance in a strong gust of wind.

I realized that after sending out my last update, with the list of "firsts", there was an important one that I didn't mention. As you know, Cuba's phone capacity and quality has been greatly improving over the past number of years, thanks to a substantial agreement with and investment from Italy. This year, for the first time, the national ETECSA phone company is offering the population an additional service: special phone numbers which, from anywhere in the country, can link right into Radio Reloj for up-to-the-minute news and weather reports on the hurricane, as well as other news. There are also special numbers for reporting problems with the telephone or electricity. Perhaps your phone doesn't work, but someone else's does. It's a new service and one that is being highly appreciated and used by the population. For Radio Reloj, there's no waiting. The calls go through immediately.

Which brings me to a final comment about Cuba's Civil Defense system: it's dynamic, responsive, fluid, flexible, always searching for ways to improve how it functions, the services that are provided to the population.

OK, I'll send this out now. Won't be able to send any others until after Ike passes. But if you want to call, lovely! My phone number is (537) 833-8971 - and I'm not going anywhere! At least not until Ike passes...

Saludos para todos/as, Susana Hurlich

(#4 - sent Sept 8th)

Hola:

All day we've been increasingly getting the "hurricane sky". That's when the sky gets full of darkening clouds that appear as if you're looking at the bottom of a huge drum top, and they move in an immense counterclockwise circle. We've also been getting increasingly stronger wind gusts although nothing really serious yet. And it's started to rain more stop start stop start but with the feeling that it'll eventually not stop until Ike passes north of Cuba.

The other weather forecaster I have here in my house are my two cats, one of whom is getting increasingly more anxious, going outside to look up at the sky and then crying worriedly. It's the change in atmospheric pressure that he feels and he doesn't like it. It's the same as when horses start to panic and want to run when they feel the deep tremors in the ground from an imminent earthquake, even if everything is appearing on the surface.

These two back-to-back hurricanes, Gustav and Ike, have been firsts in many ways.

A first: two category 4 hurricanes battering Cuba within a very short time. Never before has the country been hit by such strong hurricanes back-to-back.

A first: the extent of penetration of the sea in Baracoa, up to six blocks, something which has never happened before.

A first: Las Tunas evacuated more people than it's ever done in its history.

A first: Isla de la Juventud and Pinar del Rio passing from the Information Phase directly to the Alarm Phase, without going through the Alert Phase. This has never happened before in Cuba and relates to a certain unpredictability of Ike on the southern coast of Cuba.

As of 8pm, Ike is a category 1 hurricane with sustained winds of 130 kph. The gusts are going up to some 200 kph though, so it's still a serious hurricane. The central pressure is 966 and it's moving 20 kph in a west to a westnorthwest direction. The eye is skimming the southern coast of Cuba, meaning that there's a large penetration into Cuban territory of winds and gusts of hurricane force, and the southern coast is having serious penetrations and floods. It's almost

perfectly round and it's immense. Right now it's about 55 km east of Cienfuegos but its strong rain and wind "rings" - and don't forget, it has two! which is another unusual feature - extend a significant distance beyond the northern side of the island and the eastern part of the country - the Oriente - up through Santiago de Cuba is still getting rain - plus we're already getting Ike-related rains well to the west of where it is presently located.

But because the eye is skimming the coast, this impedes it from strengthening, at the moment, much beyond a category 1 hurricane. If, however, it distances itself just a bit from the coast, it'll immediately start getting stronger.

And the serious thing about Ike is the rains, which are heaviest BEHIND the eye, in other words, to Ike's west. And Cuba has already had lots of rain first from Fay, and then from Gustav, and now with Ike being the wettest of all three, there's very serious concerns - and constant alerts - about heavy flooding and land slides in the entire Escambray mountain range in the southern part of the provinces of Villa Clara to Cienfuegos to Sancti Spiritus.

Tomorrow morning, Tuesday, it'll be in the southern coast of Matanzas. That will be about the time that we'll know more clearly what part of western Cuba - the Occidente - will have the "pleasure" of its eye. At the moment, it could be anywhere from western Pinar del Rio to the eastern side of Provincia Habana, or even over the city of Habana itself. Just don't know at the moment. But whether it does or doesn't, for the city of Habana and the Occidente in general, the most difficult time will be from mid-day tomorrow, Tuesday, into tomorrow night.

This morning, thirteen of Cuba's fourteen provinces were in the Alarm Phase, with the Isla (a special municipality, as you know, rather than a province) and the province of Pinar del Rio being in the Information Phase. Now the latter two are in the Alarm Phase. I don't know if this is another "first", that is, that the entire country, every province, has been in the Alarm Phase during the same hurricane.

As well, for the Isla and Pinar del Rio, the Alarm Phase has also meant a full suspension, for the moment, of recuperation efforts, with a focus on protecting the work done to date and ensuring the protection of the material resources that have been sent there to date.

While all this is going on, we're already starting to get preliminary reports from Oriente about some of the damage caused by Ike, and in some areas, such as Baracoa, else in Guantanamo, and even Holguin under rains, recuperative programs are already starting. For instance, the Farola, that beautiful road that connects Baracoa on the northern coast with the southern coast of the province, and from there to the capital city of Guantanamo and the rest of Cuba (there's a road from Baracoa on the northern coast that goes to Moa in Holguin province, but it's in very bad shape) has already been cleared of fallen trees and posts. And earlier this evening, the first trucks began to arrive in Baracoa carrying roofing tiles, steel beams, wood, etc. Three of the city's six electric circuits have already been repaired and it's hoped that the other three will be operative sometime tomorrow. This country doesn't wait to get things going! Ike is still battering Cuba, and will continue to do so for another day and a half at the least, and the eastern part of the country is already engaged in recuperation. With a tremendous outsurge of participation by the

people to clean streets of debris, assist with the distribution of materials, sift through rubble for not only their own belongings, but help others who have perhaps been more unfortunate, etc.

Other areas, though, such as Camaguey, can't begin even basic clean up as it's still heavily pouring all over the province, since early last night. And all over, some municipalities are still incomunicado, for the destruction to the communication / electrical system, for the roads blocked with fallen trees and posts, for the overflowing rivers. And the reports that are coming from these areas, by radio interviews on the TV, show that people are anxious to start the work of recuperation... there's a hunger to get beyond the hurricane experience and to get into rebuilding and back to normalcy.

All the above brings me to another observation: An important part of Cuba's system of Civil Defense - perhaps the key thing that truly makes it work well - is that the country has created a culture of prevention, a culture of protection, and a culture of collective recuperation. These are not insignificant things. In creating this culture, it's created a consciousness among the people, the simplest of whom are exceedingly wise about what to do, when and how. It's also created a culture of collectivism. People take care of each other, they're aware of each other, they're not "in it" only for themselves. And there's no "show", no "taking credit". It's simply the way things are. Those of you who have lived here or visited here have seen this for yourselves, in one way or another.

A culture of caring. It has nothing to do with whether or not you like a particular individual, nothing at all. A culture of caring is simply about the recognition that "the other" has the same value as a human being as you do, the same right to live and "take space" in the world. Cuba has developed this to a very high degree, and it shows brilliantly at times like this.

It's now 8:30pm and I'll stop here to take advantage of the electricity and light to send it out. I've been receiving calls from others in Havana saying they think the lights will go out soon. Perhaps I'm wrong, but I think we'll have electricity all night. In any event, I already have my candles and matches at hand, and the batteries in my little Sony radio. And before I sat down to write this, I took the plants off the veranda - my living room is now a jungle! And a bit earlier this afternoon, I checked the drains on the roof, rolled up the rubber water tube and put it under the water tank up there, and recleared out the drains in the garage. What with the wind all day and lots of little leaves flying here and there, they had gotten slightly plugged up again from the cleaning I did several days ago.

With luck - and electricity of course! - I'll send another update. If not, I'll send an "aftermath" email.

Abrazos carinosos para todos/as, Susana Hurlich

(#3 - sent Sept 8th)

Hello all.

It's estimated that by tonight, the city of Havana will start to get its first tropical storm winds, meaning sustained winds between 63 and 117 kph. We're already in what's called the Alarm Phase, with Pinar del Rio and the Isla de la Juventud now in the Information Phase.

As of 10 this morning, Ike was a category 2 hurricane with maximum sustained winds of 155 kph and a central pressure of 960. Being over land always reduces the force of hurricanes, and when its mountains, it's even more so. But to give you an idea of what that means: Hurricane Lili (October 1996) was a category 2 hurricane. No lives were lost (if I remember correctly), but it affected seven provinces, damaging some 146,000 houses and completely destroying another 10,000. The greatest damage, though, was to agriculture: citrus, rice, banana and other vegetable crops, platano, sugar, coffee, and there were significant damages to industries, high tension posts, bridges, road, forests, etc. This is just to give you an idea of what a category 2 hurricane means!

Anyway, Ike is now moving westsouthwest at 22 kph. And it's important to analyze what this means. Keep in mind the shape of Cuba: a feisty little crocodile basking in the sun while lying in a northwest direction. So if Ike is moving westsouthwest, that means it's going to enter the ocean for a while, which in fact is going to happen sometime later today in the southern part of the province of Ciego de Avila. The ocean. The Caribbean to be exact. The very warm Caribbean to be even more exact. Temperatures around 31-32 degrees celsius. Just the kind of fuel that Ike needs to start growing again in intensity. Then, as all hurricanes when they come into the Caribbean, it'll start heading a bit westnorthwest. But we won't know how much its "tilt" will be until it's actually there, and that's what will then provide an insight into whether it - that is, the eye - passes over Matanzas, or Provincia Habana, or Ciudad de La Habana, or Pinar del Rio, or or or... So for those of you who are following Ike on Internet, be sure to keep your eyes on its movements once it's in the water...

I've just called Baracoa. The sun is out and people are slowly returning to their homes to assess the damages. There is still no electricity. In my mother-in-law's home some of the 14 people who sought shelter there - as I mentioned, it's a high-ground home with cement walls and roof - are still there. It's a small house, three bedrooms but small. She explained that she organized where everyone would sleep, between the beds and chairs and whatnot. Cooking was very well organized as each family group had brought some food which was shared among all. Water, which at the moment isn't running in the pipes, was very carefully and sparingly used from the three large barrels. Their dog Tribolin didn't budge the entire time from under the kitchen table. Early last night, the locally elected delegado brought over a little battery-run radio so that people could get news. So I was able to "retire" from my phone calls to the group every 3-4 hours! I'm mentioning in some detail what went on in my in-law's home as this will give you an idea of what goes on in ALL homes where lots of people gather during hurricanes. Nothing chaotic. Nothing desperate. People organizing and cooperating and pooling their resources and keeping each other's spirits up.

And it's the same everywhere. For instance, in my home in Vedado, if Ike is to make a more direct and vicious hit, a friend of mine who lives near the coast in western Havana will bring his

car over and put it into my garage. And there's a family of five who live on the top floor of an apartment building who will come to my house to pass the hurricane here.

Another detail about hurricanes: maximum sustained winds can measure one thing "on the ground", but as you go up floor by floor in a highrise, the sustained wind gets more intense the higher and higher you get. My sister-in-law Dania lives on a second floor in the southern Havana municipality of San Francisco del Paula. she just called to say that they're taking things off the walls and bringing all the plants indoors, as they plan to lock up the house and go to her husband's parent's house downstairs.

Everyone preparing...

I spoke with another friend in Baracoa. Some of you know him: Roberto, one of the finest if not THE finest archaeologist in that part of the country. I had been trying to call him and his family all day yesterday and the day before, but as no one was answering I assumed they had been evacuated as they live just across the street from the Malecon. Luckily in the one area that's a tiny bit higher, but that one metre of elevation makes all the difference. Anyway, I found them home this morning. Miraculously nothing was destroyed in their home, but yesterday morning when he and others were taking some of the valuable things out of the house - his work computer, the TV, clothing, electodomestic appliances, etc. - waves were already higher than the house, which is two stories. In fact, waves finally got as high as FIVE stories before Ike left that zone, with sustained winds of 140 kph and gusts up to 180 km, and up to 280 mm of rain falling in many places of the province (plus in Santiago de Cuba) in a 24-hour period.

The home of one of Roberto's daughters, however, was completely destroyed. She lives a short distance away but nearer the beach area. All that's left is rubble. The fridge was carried away and they still haven't found it. But they said that they have the most important thing, the most important resource, intact: their lives! Because - as I wrote some years ago during Hurricane Katrina - you can rebuild a house. You can rebuild a bridge. You can repair roads and towers and agricultural fields. But what you can't build anew is one lost life, one missing person. And Cuba is a country that knows that the only riches that count, that truly count, is human life. Everything else is peripheral, like clothes that can be shed and you still have a human being, an essential living and breathing and thinking and feeling and creative human being.

This brings me to some other things that I'd like to say...

I've been getting lots of emails and phone calls from people all over - for which I deeply thank you. Not only is it heartening to know the tremendous outpouring of concern for Cuba and the Cuban people that many are feeling, but the personal support is also helpful to me. And when I told some Cuban friends about the recuperation assistance that Canadian groups and individuals are already mobilizing, they said they were very touched by this. One person even cried, saying that the hand of solidarity and friendship from outside the country is one of the things that helps Cubans get through this.

But listen to this. Here's what one friend said:

"Sitting here comfortably in Toronto it all seems a bit unreal, and I don't think we will get much information from the standard media, as Cuba is not given much shrift. Besides, when the death toll is substantial elsewhere, the relative sparing for Cuba makes it seem like small potatoes, since nobody bothers to ask why the same storm leads to relatively few casualties."

Sad, but true, eh? Here Cuba has one of the finest, if not THE finest, Civil Defense system in the world - the proof is in the pudding, as they say, and statistics don't lie. Cuba loses very, very few people when hurricanes strike. Part of the reason, and if I've said this before, that's ok, as it bears repeating, is that not only does Cuba have a highly efficiently organized Civil Defense system, developed since 1963 when the horrendous Flora struck eastern Cuba and left thousands dead in its wake, but the people have confidence in their Civil Defense system. You can legislate a Civil Defense system. But you can't legislate the confidence of the people. That's something that is GAINED, over the years, through proven action. So what's happened is that while there is a Civil Defense system, it's as if ALL the people, the entire population, is actually part of the Civil Defense system. There's no panic. There's no running chaotically. People know what they have to do and where they have to do, and they do it in a timely way. And the Civil Defense authorities know where everyone is. Everyone is accounted for. No one is invisible. No one is without a name.

Some examples: Civil Defense has a very good idea of what areas need to be evacuated, what areas are potentially vulnerable to inundations, penetration of the ocean, flooding, landslides, etc. They know how many people are there. And the evacuation centres are prepared in time. That's the key: in time. The other key is: organization and discipline. The final key: confidence. As always happens, at least 85% or more of the people to be evacuated wind up going to the homes of friends or family elsewhere. But Civil Defense knows this! When they give evacuation figures, they're able to say, always, that such-and-such a number of people are in the evacuation shelters, and such-and-such a number of evacuees are sheltered in homes of family or friends. No one is invisible. Shouldn't that be a normal thing? That no one is invisible? Shouldn't that be something that people should just be able to assume? Why is it that the normal, the human, has become revolutionary? Shouldn't it just be part of being human?

Unfortunately, as we know all too painfully, it's not. For instance, we don't even know how many really died in New Orleans during Katrina! Isn't that a crime? Of course! And the silence, at both official levels as well as in the press...

In Cuba, it's impossible to be invisible, impossible to be silent. No one can simply disappear. Even if the anti-Cuban press wants to make us think that there's no landmass between Haiti and Jamaica and Florida, we know it's there. And it's called Cuba! And what's most "threatening" about it is that it shows that some things can be done well - and Civil Defense is one of them. Even in Pinar del Rio and the the Isla, the construction and electricity brigades from other provinces already know where they're supposed to go if Ike strikes. And they're already taking precautions to minimize potential damage to the reconstruction that's already taken place. (On the news this morning, we heard interviews with some of the members of these contingents...)

Another interesting thing: here Ike is still on Cuban land, and will most likely be on Cuban land again after it goes into the Caribbean Ocean. But evaluations are already taking place in Baracoa, in Holguin - the "city of parks" that, among other losses, has lost lots of trees from these parks - to

assess the extent of damages that were sustained. High government officials are also present, helping in the evaluative missions in these areas. Machado, first vice-president, Lage, vice-president, Lazo, vice-president, Cintra Frias, member of the Council of State, and many, many others. Among the first areas they go are to those areas that are incomunicado.

This has turned into a longer update than I anticipated, and I better send it out. I'll try to send another one later today, and, if and when electricity goes out, I have enough battery power to send out at least a last note to let you know.

Warm embraces to all. Susan Hurlich

(#2 - sent Sept 7th)

Hola all:

Things are developing fairly quickly so it's time to send you another update.

A little report on the TV just updated the situation in Guantanamo. The entire province is without electricity. Cuba has a policy of turning off electricity and gas, as a preventive measure to prevent short circuits and even fires in walls, once sustained winds reach 60 kph. Flooding everywhere along the coast. Some 60,000 evacuees in just this one province and a possibility that the number might grow as the night progresses. Some people do self-evacuation, i.e., they may not be in a potential flood area, but if their house is of a weaker construction, they'll go to a family or neighbour's house that is more solid. People are being advised to go to what are called category 1 structures, meaning buildings or houses with concrete / cement walls and roof, with windows and doors that are reinforced - these are the only kinds of structures that are considered to be able to resist a hurricane of this force.

When I last spoke with my mother-in-law in Baracoa, about two hours ago (it's almost 8pm now), she had 14 friends and neighbours in her house - which is category 1 - each family unit bringing food and kerosene with which to cook. She mentioned that a family doctor making an urgent house call near the Malecon got a broken leg when a strong wave came over the low Malecon wall and knocked him down. (Just now, on the TV, the Guantanamo provincial president of the Consejo de Defensa said that seven people have been injured but none seriously, and that there are no deaths.) Also, the TV report from Baracoa (by radio) says that the Malecon has flooded up to 400 metres into the city, in some areas between five-six blocks penetration, making it the greatest penetration in Baracoa in recorded history. For those of you who know Baracoa, water has come up to the party headquarters and very near the municipal administration building...

Although northeastern Cuba has been hit by many hurricanes over the years, this is the first time that this part of the country is being hit by a hurricane of such force. Another important detail: by no means is this the first time that Cuba has had two successive hurricanes in a very short period of time. In 2002 Hurricanes Lili and Isidore - both category two, if I remember correctly - hit western and central Cuba, with tremendous damages to all sectors and especially to housing. And there

have been other times that two hurricanes were separated by only a few days, or a week, or ten days. In the case of Gustav and Ike, it's eight days.

But this is the first time in the last two centuries that Cuba has been hit successively by two category FOUR hurricanes! This has never before happened in the country's recorded history.

And I'm sure that the relationship between more frequent and more violent weather systems around the world, whether hurricanes or tsunamis or whatever - and global warming is not far from anyone's minds, nor the fact that this is what we can anticipate seeing more and more of in the very near future...

Virtually the entire country is mobilized for Ike. As of 3pm, eleven of the country's 14 provinces were put into the Alarm Phase. And Ciudad Habana and Provincia Habana are now in the Information Phase. Over 1,700 evacuation centres are organized around the country, each with the necessary supplies of medicines (and on-site health specialists), food and water. Over 900 food elaboration centres are stocked, and already working. Some 56,000 students around the country have been sent to their homes from residential schools. All classes have been suspended around the country. Some of the country's parabolics - antennae, whatever - have been dismantled to protect them. This means that some areas of the country will be without TV and local structures will have to rely on phone and radio for communication. Some areas, such as Maisi in the far eastern part of Guantanamo, are already incomunicado. La Farola, that beautiful road that goes over the mountains from south to north, connecting Baracoa with the rest of the country (for those of you who don't know this area...) is experiencing lots of landslides, fallen trees and electric posts, etc.

As of 8pm, Ike was 35 km east of Punta Lucrecia in Holguin, with landfall expected in an hour (9:30pm more or less). It's a high category 3 hurricane with sustained winds of 195 kph. central pressure of 945 and moving west at 22 kph.

Fidel has just issued his most recent "Reflection" that was read on tonight's Mesa Redonda (Round Table). No doubt a copy of it is already available in Internet. He started out by saying that before the country's psyche (and material base) has begun to recover from the lashing from Gustav - because although it's destruction is mainly localized in the Isla de la Juventud and Pinar del Rio, the psychological impact has been countrywide - Cuba is being hit by another equally strong, and potentially more widely destructive, hurricane. People in the bread line this afternoon were talking about this very thing, in different words but the same thought.

One last thing I want to briefly mention is that, as you know, the U.S. is one of many countries that have offered assistance to Cuba in the wake of Gustav. And, as you also probably know, Cuba turned it down. First, the US wants to send people to evaluate the damages. The US ALWAYS wants to send people to Cuba to evaluate damages. They seem to have a hard time understanding that Cuba is highly prepared, with a very wide number of trained and experienced professionals, to analyze its own damages - and does so very, very quickly, making this information available to the public through newspapers, the TV, the radio, etc. Second, Cuba said that if the US really wants to help Cuba, it should let Cuba buy - note, Cuba didn't say that the US should "donate", just let Cuba buy - what it needs directly from the US. In other words, stop the embargo, which does a lot more damage to Cuba than any hurricane.

I'll send this out now. FYI, as I can only send one email to five people at once - it's a technical limitation of the Cuban server - I've been sending out about six copies of these updates, to a total of some 30 people, some of whom have been sending them on to others. I'll likely send you another one tomorrow.

Meanwhile, to those of you who have been calling and/or sending emails, thank you! This is very welcome.

Several people have also written asking if I know about any plans in Canada to organize hurricane reconstruction assistance for Cuba. I understand that the CNC (Canadian Network on Cuba, an umbrella organization for Canadian friendship and solidarity groups) is organizing and sponsoring a campaign. I don't have the details, and would appreciate hearing what campaigns are being organized, as on this end, people are very interested to hear about this.

Very warm embraces to all,

Susan

(#1 - sent Sept 7th)

Hola all:

This email is about something very immediate and of much collective concern: the imminent arrival of Hurricane Ike.

I'm sure you're all following Ike's path and developments, as well as the heroic and extremely efficient recuperation efforts in the wake of Hurricane Gustav - which, as you know, did horrendous damage in Isla de la Juventud and Pinar del Rio, but which also shows an impressive victory by the Cuban people and its system of Civil Defense in that not one life was lost.

What a tragedy that we can't say the same for Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and even the U.S., all of which had loss of life, especially Haiti.

I'm writing this email to give you an idea of the "feel" on the streets, what people are saying, what people are doing. As of noon today, Ike remains a category 4 hurricane with sustained winds of 215 kph and gusts higher. It's 270 km east of Isla Inagua Grande in the eastern Bahamas and 465 km east of Punta Lucrecia in Holguin, moving eastsoutheast at 24 kph.

All the eastern provinces, from Camaguey to Guantanamo, are in the Alarm Phase. Cuban Civil Defense has four phases for hurricanes: Information, Alert, Alarm and Recuperation. Ciego de Avila west to and including Matanzas are in the Information Phase. CubaVision (TV) as well as Radio Rebelde are already dedicating full-time reporting to what's happening in all the eastern provinces: the state of preparations (evacuations, for instance, virtually complete in many

locations), mobilized support services (health, food preparation, etc.), the status of dams (i.e., their existing capacity and how much additional water they can accept; if they're super-full, the spillways are open to increase their capacity), etc. Coastal areas are being virtually cleared out as heavy inundations are anticipated - and the Instituto de Meteorologia is saying that its direct impact on Cuba - meaning its presence on Cuban territory - will likely last for at least two full days. Reports are also saying that it's the first time since 1959 that a hurricane this strong has the potential to affect such a large part of Cuba.

Aside: in the evacuation centres, not only are evacuees given health and food support, but there are also culture and indoor sports programs, as well as ongoing information programs.

This morning, at about 9am, I called family and friends in Baracoa, Guantanamo. At that time, heavy rains were already falling, and in the local meteorological station about 20 km outside Baracoa, gusts of 120 kph were being registered. Even people in areas that don't flood are taking precautions, boarding up their windows for reinforcement from the anticipated strong winds. And people from lower areas are seeking shelter in the homes of family and friends on the higher grounds of Baracoa. (For instance, some four families in the home of my in-laws.) It's anticipated that in another eight or so hours (possibly by 10pm or so tonight), Ike will actually be on Cuban territory, and although its entry point will likely be somewhere between Camaguey and Holguin, it's an immense system and its hurricane winds and torrential rains will (are already) affect a huge area.

Aside: I had a long interruption - two visitors - since I wrote the above, and now it's a couple of hours later. It's now just before 3pm as I continue writing...

About half an hour ago, I called Baracoa - my in-laws; the phone lines are still working - to find out how things are, and to give them the latest news about Baracoa that was just on the TV. The electricity in Baracoa was cut at 11 this morning and they don't have a radio, so as long as the phone is working, they said they're counting on me to be their "news reporter" about what's happening in their area. Here's what the TV said - and keep in mind that Ike is still some eight hours EAST of Baracoa! Gusts about 130-140 kph and one recorded at over 200 kph; 50 mm of rain in 24 hours; over 24,200 evacuated from around the municipality of whom over 23,500 are in the homes of family and friends (this is typical; the extremely high solidarity among Cubans. Even so, the 21 evacuation centres that exist in the municipality were prepared to receive the full number); over 3,000 students from residential schools already at home; some coastal areas such as Turey already flooding; some trees and posts down. This morning, Sunday, all ration stores were open in Baracoa so that people could buy what they wanted. And, to repeat, Ike is still over 200 km east of Baracoa.

Here in Havana, we had heavy rains all morning, not related to Ike but, as people on the street were saying, part of the rains that Gustav was supposed to drop but didn't. Lines at the stores - whether peso or CUC - are immense, going out to the street and along the sidewalk. The CUC bakeries are sold out. The peso bakeries are the priority, though, and are working full time, with long lines. At the peso bakery nearest my house, the line is over a block long. I just went to mark my place in line, and will return in an hour to hopefully buy bread - if it hasn't already been sold out in which case more batches will be in the oven.

The big concern that everyone has is that Ike might well be similar to Hurricane Dennis, which entered Cuba as a category 4 hurricane in July 2005 (the year of Katrina, just over a month later), and left in its wake ten of the country's fourteen provinces seriously affected and 16 deaths, one of the highest in Cuba since 1959. For Hurricane Ike, most of the 15 hurricane diagnostic tools show it moving northwest after it enters Cuba, and since Cuba's landmass itself goes northwest, this means that Ike will most likely blast right up the length of the island, possibly all the way to Pinar del Rio! And it'll hit both sides of the country. It's about as wide as Gustav (over 250 km in radius), and when you consider that Cuba's width ranges only between 31 and 191 km, well, you can see the kind of damage that a strong hurricane could cause if it marches up the island.

And imagine the irony, actually, a painful irony, of seeing the news report on TV a couple of nights ago, of Santiago de Cuba filling two ships with roofing sheets and 500- and 1,000-gallon water tanks to send to Isla de la Juventud, and preparing a train shipment with the same for Pinar del Rio - well, imagine this going on at the same time that Santiago de Cuba is simultaneously preparing for the arrival of Ike.

It's an awful lot for one country! But then I keep thinking of Haiti, and the consequences of what happens when a nation has neither the politics nor the ability to prepare are sobering. But then, as we know, Haiti is an internationally-caused tragedy...

There's much more to say, but I know that you can also get a lot of the "data" information on Internet. I'll continue to try sending you updates giving you a sense of what people are doing and how they're feeling.

More later. Abrazos para todos/as de Susan