

Remembering the 1988 Wrath of Hurricane Gilbert

Hurricane Gilbert struck Jamaica during the afternoon of Sept. 12, 1988, and left a tremendous path of destruction across the island nation.

Dozens of people lost their lives during the storm, which took less than a day to navigate across the island. Damage reached at least \$4 billion and included flattened crops, destroyed roads and demolished homes and businesses from the hurricane's wind, storm surge and torrential rainfall. On September 10, Gilbert attained hurricane status west of the Dominican Republic. Barometer readings fell precipitously there the following day, eventually reaching 26.13, the lowest ever recorded to that date. Gaining strength, Gilbert slid past Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Haiti, heading straight for Jamaica. On September 12, with winds reaching 175 miles per hour, the now Category 5 hurricane devastated Jamaica. With a 40-mile-wide eye, the hurricane covered the entire island. The tin roofs that covered most homes were no match for the winds--about 80 percent of the island's homes were seriously damaged and approximately 500,000 of the country's 2 million people were left homeless. Nearly every home on the island lost electricity. Worst of all, more than 200 people lost their lives. Gilbert was the most destructive storm in the history of Jamaica and went on to become one of the most intense hurricanes in the Atlantic Basin. It was the first hurricane in 37 years to hit Jamaica directly. The previous was Hurricane Charlie on August 17, 1951, which destroyed Port Royal for the third time in its history. Loss of life then was over 150. Aircraft recorded maximum flight-level winds of 185 mph as it passed near the Cayman Islands on Sept. 13. Two days later, Gilbert was still going strong when it crossed the Gulf of Mexico and hit the Yucatán Peninsula. The resort town of Cancun lost half of its hotels and nearby Cozumel was also severely damaged. Thirty thousand people in the area lost their homes. As the storm moved toward the peninsula's west side, tens of thousands were forced to flee. In all, almost 200,000 Mexicans were left homeless by Gilbert. In the Gulf of Mexico, a 300-foot Cuban freighter caught in the storm was thrown into a shrimp boat, killing 28 people. More people were killed when the hurricane moved to the northeast coast of Mexico near Monterrey. Police evacuated the area, but sent people on a detour along the Santa Cantina River. A flash flood of the river caught four buses and several cars unprepared and 200 people were washed away. Finally, a spate of tornadoes on the edge of Gilbert killed 3 people in Texas. Total lives lost during Gilbert's wrath through the Caribbean and the southwestern Gulf of Mexico topped 400 with damage exceeding \$7 billion in 1988 dollars. The Jamaican trait of 'tekking bad ting mek joke' was brought vividly to the fore in the aftermath of that hurricane. One such example was the hit song 'Wild Gilbert', by singer and composer Lloyd Lovindeer, which poked fun at the tragedy of the event and has become a Jamaican classic.