Major Hurricane Matthew Continues to Rapidly Intensify; Hurricane Watch Issued For Jamaica

Major Hurricane Matthew strengthened to a high-end Category 4 by mid-Friday evening, and it continues to rapidly strengthen.

The storm poses a danger to Jamaica, parts of Hispañola, eastern Cuba and the Bahamas early next week. Its potential U.S. impact later next week still remains unclear. Hurricane Matthew became the fifth hurricane of the 2016 Atlantic hurricane season early Thursday afternoon. Matthew was located 80 miles north-northwest of Punta Gallinas, Colombia, as of Friday evening. A Hurricane Hunters reconnaissance mission Friday evening measure winds of 150 mph in a dropsonde in Matthew's eyewall. The central pressure continues to quickly drop as Matthew intensifies. A hurricane watch has been issued for Jamaica. Winds of 75 mph or greater are possible on Monday, and tropical storm force winds may begin late Sunday. A tropical storm warning continues for he northern coast of Colombia. Winds of 40 mph or greater are likely in northern Colombia on Friday evening. A tropical storm watch has been issued for the southern coast of Haiti from the border of the Dominican Republic to Port-Au-Prince. Tropical storm force winds may begin there by late Sunday. The 'Caribbean Right Turn' Matthew is currently experiencing some wind shear provided by southwest winds several thousand feet above the surface, but it continues to become stronger anyway. Strengthening is forecast into Saturday, but when this current rapid intensification phase will end is unclear. It is possible that Matthew could become a rare Category 5 hurricane before this phase of rapid intensification slows down. First up, given the southern track, outer bands of rain and winds to tropical storm force are likely in portions of coastal Colombia to the Venezuela border through early Saturday. Beyond that, uncertainty is still considerable on the critical details of this system. Over the next couple of days, Matthew should continue to move west or just south of due west as it rides the southern periphery of the Bermuda high. Sometime on Saturday or early Sunday, Matthew should make its long-anticipated northwest or northward turn in the Caribbean Sea, as the system reaches the southwestern edge of the Bermuda high. The critical details regarding when exactly that turn is made, how sharp it is, and Matthew's intensity at that time will dictate the impacts for Jamaica, Hispañola, and eastern or central Cuba. Unfortunately, there is still some important forecast uncertainty regarding those important details, which is common for a tropical cyclone forecast several days out. Phases of rapid intensification like the one experienced by Matthew on Thursday and Friday only hamper efforts to gain a better handle on the forecast. For now, impacts could begin in Jamaica and Hispañola (particularly Haiti) as soon as Sunday night, and in eastern Cuba as soon as Monday. Rainfall amounts in western Haiti, Jamaica, and parts of eastern Cuba could get near 12 inches. Isolated amounts of 16-20 inches in the mountainous regions of Jamaica and Haiti are possible, and life threatening flash floods and mudslides may be a result.