

Hurricane Irene hit the Bahamas as a Category 3 storm, affecting all inhabited islands to various degrees from 23rd to 26th August 2011. Hurricane force winds extended outwards up to 70 miles from the centre and tropical storm force winds extended outward up to 290 miles from the centre. The storm surge raised water levels as much as 7 to 11 feet above normal tide levels over the central and north-western Bahamas.



Whilst the Bahamas is a country with high GDP, inequities are clear in certain areas, affecting mostly older persons, people of poor socio-economic status, and immigrants, many of whom are illegal. These groups live in a number of vulnerable communities with poor housing infrastructure, no toilet facilities, no running water and crowded living conditions. The illegal immigrants are mainly from Haiti and their population is estimated at 100,000, concentrated on the islands of Abaco, New Providence and Eleuthera.

The Princes Margaret Hospital in Nassau, a hospital of 400 beds, is the only health facility providing tertiary care. The hospital structure was already weakened by a lack of sustained maintenance.

Despite no deaths being reported and few major injuries, the damage and disruption to both public health and environmental health were more significant than initially thought. The following are main concerns:

- Water availability is considered one of the main priorities in the most affected islands. Major repairs are needed to restore the water supply and electricity. Repair time is estimated to be at least one month for the worst hit. The lack of provision of safe food and water to the affected communities is a cause for concern.

- The immigrant population in some of the most communities is of concern in light of the deleterious conditions observed.

- Fifteen of 69 health facilities in the Bahamas have reported damage to date, some severe. The disruption in primary health care due to the loss of communication and the suspension of activities is a factor that needs to be recovered and reinforced, especially in the vulnerable communities.

PAHO Response

PAHO/WHO deployed a team of six (6) persons from the Regional Response Team to complement the PAHO/WHO Bahamas Representation in providing support to the Government of The Bahamas in their response to Hurricane Irene. The team members were:

- Dr Dana Van Alphen Team Leader
- Dr. Homero Silva WAT/SAN Specialist
- Dr. Robert Lee Epidemiologist
- Mr. Hugo Martinez LSS/SUMA Expert, Safe Hospital Evaluator
- Ms. Sally Edwards Environmental Health Specialist
- Ms. Nicole Wynter Disaster Specialist

The team participated in:

- Field assessment visits in New Providence, Cat Island, Long Island and Abaco Island.
- The assessment process was in support of, and directed by, the Ministry of Health.
- Meetings with officials from the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Environment and NEMO.

- Briefings with regional and international responders: CDEMA, USAID, MSM
- Preparation and review of situation reports and data produced by Ministry of Health.