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Hurricane Richard rages through Central Belize

Demolished, topless and water-drenched homes, uprooted trees, downed power-lines, mangled signs and billboards, and scattered zinc and debris were the evidence that Hurricane Richard left today in its aftermath, even in the capital city, Belmopan, which most Belizeans have regarded as the ideal refuge from such ferocious storms. The reality Belizeans now know is, nowhere in the country is entirely safe from a hurricane.

Amandala surveyed the damage across much of Central Belize—the most impacted part of the country—and found victims grateful to The Almighty that their lives have been spared and energetically trying to pick up the pieces.

Early Monday, October 25, we ventured to the Hummingbird Highway, over which several roadside trees had toppled, stretching across the route leading to Culture Capital, Dangriga, where the hurricane’s impacts were also felt.

A Ministry of Works crew had to be dispatched to clear a tall tree, which had fallen on a power-line between Belmopan and Armenia Village, off the highway. We observed that there was much more debris to be cleaned on a piece of road miles ahead, but there was no major wreckage in that area.

Between the Cayo and Belize Districts, where the strongest winds raged during the hurricane, the stories of devastation were many.

Tree smashes into couple’s bedroom in Roaring Creek

Hurricane Richard downed limbs and trees at the famous Guanacaste Park, a botanical park located at the entrance to Belmopan. Just up the Western Highway, at Roaring Creek Village, we came across a story of tragedy for hurricane victim John Chimilio. Hurricane Richard’s 90 mile-per-hour winds caused a very tall hog plum tree to smash through the house, ending up right in front of the Chimilio and his wife’s bed.

“The wind was making a lot of noise,” recalled Chimilio. “She [Chimilio’s wife] was running up and down the house, and when she was running about, I grabbed her. As I grabbed her, a minute after I grabbed her then this tree fell down right where we were standing up. That’s the part that made me even more frightened. So we ended up escaping through the backdoor.”

John and his wife Lovina did not seek shelter, and after the hurricane wrecked their home, they had to weather out some of the storm in their backyard.

“We stayed behind the house for an hour until a neighbor [Harrison] came to rescue us,” said Chimilio.

“I wasn’t worried about me but about my wife,” he added.

The oversized tree had smashed the kitchen area, destroying all the couple’s groceries and their household appliances. It also partially blocked the exit from the house and killed several chickens in the adjacent yard of the landlord, Viola Spence. The loss is estimated to be thousands of dollars.

In that same yard, Hurricane Richard also downed a number of trees. We saw the zinc roofing from the kitchen strewn about 20 feet away from the demolished house.

Spence’s family said they are trying to get temporary shelter for the Chimilios until they are able to restore the house for them.

Just across the street from the Chimilios’ home, we met Evan Vernon, who turned 44 on the same day Richard struck. It is a birthday he said he would never forget. He lives in a two-storey wooden home on an elevated portion of Roaring Creek covering 5 acres.

“A lot of trees fell down,” said Vernon, pointing at his vehicle buried under the limbs of an 100-foot tree in the yard. “I hope I could salvage [my vehicle].”

“I thought [this house] would be a sanctuary,” he said, referring to his family home, “but nonetheless we are safe, limb and life.”

“We like to take hurricanes lightly,” says Inez Patnett

At the height of Hurricane Richard’s intensity, cousins Stephanie and Joanna, residents of Roaring Creek, ran across the street with their four children to their neighbor’s house when their two-storey wooden house began to shake in roaring winds.

They left between 7:00 and 8:00 p.m. and returned about 2:00 a.m. to find that a portion of their roof was gone and water had soaked their bed and stove.

Coconut, pear, mango and sour orange trees from the backyard had also been uprooted.

This was the women’s first experience with a hurricane, but their aunt, Inez Patnett, who lives in another part of Roaring Creek, had weathered Hurricane Greta 32 years ago (1978) in the same house from which Stephanie and Joanna had to flee. Having experienced Greta, said Patnett, she already knew what to expect with Richard.

“We like to take hurricanes lightly, the younger generation, but now we have to learn to take precautions. The younger generation does not like to pay attention. They want to experience it, but they don’t know what it is,” warned Patnett, saying her nieces surely don’t want to ever experience that again.

Hurricane refuge, Belmopan, also battered

It came as a surprise to many that Belmopan, the Garden City, was also jolted by Hurricane Richard. The hurricane peeled off the entire roof of Jolina’s homemade ice cream and food and threw it to the ground; it also wrestled an oversized Builders’ Hardware sign, mounted on metal and concrete, to the ground.

There were scores of uprooted trees and tons of uprooted shrubs, mangled billboards and instances of torn housetops across the city.

Power lines were also damaged in that municipality where residents have never felt the direct effects of a hurricane.

Conversely, most homes in the area were intact.

Western Highway villages pummeled

We took to the Western Highway, between Belmopan and Belize City, to survey the damage in that stretch of Central Belize.

About mid-morning, we attempted to first make our way to More Tomorrow Village, Cayo, which we understood had suffered substantial impacts, but we had to turn back because, according to Ministry of Human Development staff we met on the More Tomorrow Road, the road was impassible for a distance of about 500 feet with waters that were chest-high.

Between Miles 23 and 33 on the Western Highway, several light poles were leaning or lying on the ground, most of them tilted away from the highway. Acting Chief Meteorologist, Dennis Gonguez says this is right where the eye of the hurricane passed.

On our way to the Gracie Rock and Hattieville area of the Belize District, which we understood had also taken a heavy blow from Richard, we observed two well-known business establishments and adjacent structures with visible damage.

Nearly half of Amigo’s Restaurant, a popular stop in the La Democracia area, had been battered by the hurricane.

“I did not see too much; we were sitting out the storm in the car,” said the owner/manager, George Balazs, when we asked him to relay to us what unfolded the night before.

Balazs, who says he has never experienced a hurricane, said that sometime between 9:30 and 10:00, the structure was ripped apart. The section of the restaurant that seats 90 people collapsed in the hurricane, while the front part of the kitchen lost its roofing.

They have no insurance, and he and two employees, Herson Garcia and Marvin Aldana, were already working Monday morning to salvage what they could and put the place back together.

Not too far from there, the Belize Zoo signs were damaged. We could not visit the premises to find out how the hurricane impacted the zoo because the gate was locked.

The building of Jih Chan Company Limited, an agro-processing facility, also lost its roofing and suffered other structural damages. So did the nearby buildings in that close-gated Chinese community.

Gracie Rock villagers take a hard hit

Further down the highway, at Gracie Rock, around Miles 21 and 22 on the Western Highway, we observed that several houses along the roadside had lost some or all of their roofing. It was in this village that we heard many stories of loss.

Even the bus stop located right in front of the Youth Hostel was destroyed, as it lost its entire roof, and a portion of the concrete shed broke off during the hurricane.

Mother and entrepreneur, Merlene Kerr, resident of Gracie Rock, told us that she, her common-law husband and a drunken neighbor, Mark, who had fallen asleep at her house, survived underneath two tables inside her living room. At about 8:00 on Sunday night, the hurricane tore off the majority of the roofing of her elevated wooden house, about two decades old.

She and her husband were waiting out the storm in their bed when the roof right above them began to loosen. Kerr said that she tried to seal it with some clothes, to no avail.

“I ran outside [to the living room] and told him [my husband] we have to go to safety and try to get under the two desks,” said Kerr, who thinks it is a miracle they are still alive.

“I was giving a drunken man [her neighbor Mark] lodging that same night and I had to drag him with us under the table,” she also recounted.

“They are coward,” Kerr added. “I used to think men are brave but they are worse than me. I am telling you they are worse than me, because they took to the back of me. I was in front. If anybody was to die I would have died.”

The couple did not go to sleep until 3 in the morning, soaked from the storm’s downpours.

As Kerr gave us a tour, she showed us her topless kitchen, where she was making a pot of rice and beans. Next, she took us to a room in the front of the house, where she had a grocery store.

“The top went and the hurricane took some of the groceries,” she said. The storm, interestingly, left behind the crates of eggs that were placed atop a table in the shop.

All this befell the Kerr family despite the attempts they made on Sunday, before the hurricane struck, to reinforce their roof. She had gotten her son to nail wooden planks around the edges, but they did not have enough wood to brace the entire width, Kerr said.

“I did not have sufficient to nail the zinc to the end, and so that’s where it started to peel off,” she told Amandala, also showing us some of the remaining zinc that the hurricane had started to rip into parts.

Seven people live in the Kerr home; however, the others, including a pregnant woman, had sought shelter elsewhere.

Kerr said that Gracie Rock chairman Lance Usher had already visited the area and said he would contact the National Emergency Management Organization (NEMO) to get help for affected villagers. She prays they get help quickly, because the family has nowhere else to live.

Kerr also told us that her children’s government-issued school books were also damaged in the storm, along with all the family’s furniture, appliances, photos and personal belongings.

While most of the damage was to wooden homes, some concrete homes in Gracie Rock were not spared. Anna and Mario Rivera, parents of four children, cannot live in their concrete bungalow, which lost the majority of its roof and the front door, causing everything in their home to get soaked. They were able to repair a window which had been dislodged by the hurricane.

During the hurricane, they sheltered at Rivera’s mom, whose concrete-roofed home was also a sanctuary to friends and relatives living in the area. The couple plans to stay there until their home is restored.

Not too far away from the Rivera home, the small wooden home of Shanneal Pollard and Jeremiah Rivera lost its roofing and most of its walls.

“I really need to see the Prime Minister, Miss. I don’t have a house,” said Pollard, 19, and seven months pregnant with her first child. “All my baby things blew away in the hurricane,” she added.

Pollard said that her dog Chuck and her father-in-law’s dog also went missing in the hurricane.

Elena Fernandez, who waited out the storm at her sister’s home, Mary Rivera, returned home Monday morning to find her home devastated. She told us that her roof flew off, but she was able to save a few items of clothing and her son’s school books.
Brandon Kerr, his wife Violet Williams, and their son Tyrese, 5 months, were in their home when a tree crashed into the living room. They were in the kitchen when it happened and decided that they did not want to spend the rest of the night in that house.

After 11:00 that night, they got help from some rescuers who were in the area to help neighbors go to safety. Kerr went to his uncle, Clive Kerr, where the storm also left its imprint, partially damaging the roof and kitchen area. The good news is, nobody got hurt.

When they went back home, Kerr and his wife waded through the water to find his home in a soggy mess.

Hattieville also takes a hit

After visiting Gracie Rock, we went to speak with victims in Hattieville, at Mile 16 ½ on the Western Highway. About a block away from the highway, we found at least eight wooden and plycem houses in the same vicinity, which suffered major damage.

Richard Welch, 46, told us that his 2-bedroom home lost most of its roof and collapsed to the ground; now they have nowhere to live, because the foundation planks shattered the flooring.

At about 6:00 p.m., the hurricane (bearing Welch’s first name) started to affect them with strong winds and rains, and so he and his wife, Judith Welch, decided to seek shelter at a friend’s home. Early the following morning, they returned to find that their home had collapsed and everything inside was soaked.

“The amount of breeze that was blowing was nothing nice,” said Welch, father of 3.

Travis Andrews, who was with his wife and 3 sons, including their 7-month-old baby, moved out of their home only 10 minutes before it collapsed. When he realized that the roof-top of the bathroom was lifting, he knew they had to leave the house.

“My roof flew about 200 feet and it destroyed my neighbor’s kitchen completely...” Andrews told us, while sitting in the pan of a pick-up truck that was helping him to transport his furniture to his in-laws’ house.

“I was taking it for granted and thought the house could bear it,” said Andrews, who told us that he will definitely evacuate early next time.

His home, partially wooden and partially concrete, is “totaled,” he said.

James Campbell had hammer and nails in hand when we arrived at the rubble that was once his home, which was elevated on posts before the hurricane struck.

“I was lying down on my bed, figuring I would not have to go anywhere and later on my wife said, ‘Honey better we leave.’ And so we went in the bus right there,” Campbell told us.

After they left, the house fell over their 6 puppies, but they survived, he informed us.

His wife, Yolanda Gabourel, said they are “hungry, broke and poor” but thanks the Almighty for their lives.

Originally of Roatan Islands, Honduras, Nancy-Lee Banner and Noel Jackson were terrified during the storm, but Alonso Banner, 83, who had lived through the worst of Belize’s hurricanes, assured them that things would be okay.

“I don’t trust hurricanes. I witnessed houses flying in the air like kite – Honduras you see. So I know hurricane is nothing to play with,” said Jackson, who admitted that he was very uneasy during the storm.

“I got frightened bad, but I had to stay calm because I could not run out [the house],” he added.

Jackson had built a small plycem house for rent, and the roof and walls of that house were destroyed. Another of his buildings was also damaged in the hurricane, and he assesses his loss to be between $800 and $1,000 for lost roofing and damaged walls.

Banner, 54, said she lost the roofing of a house she was building in the front of her yard, her fire-hearth downstairs, on which she cooks daily, and some sacks of cement and other building supplies.

Jackson, who had been living in Hattieville for 15 years, said he had not expected the hurricane to affect them for as long as it did. He thought it would pass through in less than an hour; instead it pummeled the Hattieville area for hours. He told us that the hurricane also came with stronger winds than he had heard announced via the media earlier in the day: “The radio announced it was 70 miles per hour, but when it came it picked up to 90 miles [per hour].”

A cry for help from Tropical Park

Seventeen people, including a baby and 5 small children, were inside a two-storey home in Tropical Park when Hurricane Richard ripped off the roofing and dumped a cascade of showers into the building, soaking everything and everyone, including a young baby, inside.

Ruperto Mendez, who climbed to the roof to take some photos for our newspaper, recounted that at about 6:30 Sunday night, they began to experience hard rain and winds, and the glass windows began to shatter. An hour later, the hurricane began to peel off the roofing.

“All the zinc flew to the back,” said Mendez. “The rain started to come in and everyone got wet. All the appliances, the beds, everything got wet up.”

Seven people live at the house, but the others were seeking shelter there.

“It was frightening. [It’s the] first time I’ve been through something like that,” said Mendez’s mother, Martha Gongora, who has been renting the house from Roy Tillett for three years.

Gongora said they thought they were safe in the house, because they had sheltered Belizeans from Belize City before, and “even the owner said it is a strong house and a shelter.”

According to Gongora, the house had never even leaked before and so the devastation took them by complete surprise.

When the hurricane ripped up the house, her sister who lives in Sandhill called for help and in no time police and a rescue team from the village responded to take them to shelter. The water on the ground floor was about a foot high when they went downstairs of their home, she recalled.

Hattieville chairman, Hubert Domingo, came Monday to see if he could help the family, and find out if the family would have to go to the shelter again on Monday night, the family said.

Gongora’s family said that they did not realize until 6:00 that evening, when the storm was already making landfall on the coast, that the hurricane was heading their way. It had been drizzling only in Tropical Park earlier that evening, Mendez said.

The family said that they were not immediately able to reach the landlord on Monday morning, to speak with him about the badly needed repairs to the home, but they also appeal for public assistance to get back on their feet.

When we visited the family Monday, we found them doing laundry and trying to salvage what they could from the home, while the children and a few adults rested on the bedding in the yard.

Gongora said that they were trying to clean up before going to a neighbor’s house to spend the night.

Homeless in Belize City

Although it may not have been the only part of the country to be affected, the commercial capital was not without its stories of tragedy. We visited the Yarborough area to find government crews with tractors cleaning up the Queen Charlotte Street area of Yarborough, along the coast, and residents of the area carrying out loads of trash, which Richard had dumped in their houses and yards.

A few blocks away, we found Errol Pollard “sitting in my bruk-up house...”, as he put it. Speaking with us at 75 West Canal, at its intersection with Mex Avenue, Pollard told us about his Hurricane Richard experience:

Before Richard made landfall, his wife and one-year-old son had gone to seek shelter at KBH, where her brother works. He decided he would stay at home.

“I took this storm lightly,” said Pollard. “I really thought it was another of those [light storms].”

But when the first big wind hit early that evening, around 4:00 shaking the house, he decided not to take any more chances and sought refuge at his next-door neighbor’s house.

“I was sitting in the [neighbor’s] house and heard a crack; and when I heard that crack I looked out the window and saw [the house] go down,” Pollard said. This reportedly happened 20 minutes after he left.

The collapsed house belongs to a cousin of his living in the US, Pollard told us.

“I am just happy that I am alive and my biggest concern is, where am I going to live? Where am I going to put my wife and my child? Materialistic things, I could get back,” he told us.

Pollard, a former security guard currently unemployed, is pleading for help: “Right now anything will do.”

Rummaging through the rubble, he found a suitcase with his son’s clothes, so the boy is taken care of, Pollard reported.

He told us, however, that he could not find his electrical stove and thinks that the stove may have been looted the night of the hurricane along with his other electronics (his DVD player, TV, etc.) by heartless thieves.

“What’s wrong with these people? How do you rob people in a hurricane?” Pollard questioned, still in shock and lamenting that people could commit such heinous acts against the victims of a hurricane.

Help for hurricane victims

Here is a list of some of the victims who gave us their contact numbers, through which they can be reached with assistance:

Merlene Kerr: 628-7418
Anna and Mario Rivera: 660-6026 or 620-7725
Shanneal Pollard: 626-4819
Richard Welch: 620-6743 or 628-4637
James Campbell: 632-6466
Nancy-Lee Banner: 621-5345
Errol Pollard: 669-4296
Martha Gongora: 623-7990 or 621-9251