

Southeastern U.S. on High Alert as Helene Nears

Heavy rains lashed the Cayman Islands Tuesday as forecasters warned that a major hurricane is en route to the southeast U.S.

Hurricane watches were in effect for Florida's Tampa Bay and from Englewood to Indian Pass, as well as for eastern Mexico from Cabo Catoche to Tulum and for Cuba's Pinar del Rio province. Hurricane conditions could be possible in parts of Cuba and Mexico early Wednesday and in parts of Florida late Wednesday and through the day Thursday, according to the National Hurricane Center.

The disturbance is moving into "extremely deep and warm waters" that would fuel its intensification.

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"Conditions look quite favorable for strengthening over the eastern Gulf of Mexico on Wednesday and Thursday," the center said. "This system will become quite large and powerful before landfall."

The disturbance became Tropical Storm Helene late Tuesday and will strengthen into a Category-3 hurricane before approaching the northeast Gulf Coast. Since 2000, eight major hurricanes have made landfall in Florida, according to Philip Klotzbach, a Colorado State University hurricane researcher.

Given the anticipated large size, storm surge, wind and rain will extend far from the center of the expected storm, especially on the east side. The center warned of "inland penetration of strong winds over parts of the southeastern United States after landfall."

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Meanwhile, a storm surge watch was in effect for Florida's Tampa Bay, Charlotte Harbor and from Indian Pass south to Flamingo. The National Weather Service in Tallahassee, Florida, urged people to take potential evacuations seriously.

"10-15ft of surge is NOT survivable," it wrote on the social media platform X.

On Monday, Gov. Ron DeSantis declared a state of emergency in 41 counties.

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