

Active hurricane season forecast, fears for Haiti

The 2010 hurricane season beginning in June will be more active than usual and there is an increased chance that devastated Haiti will be hit by a strong hurricane, US weather experts have said.

"The 2010 Atlantic hurricane season will be somewhat more active than the average," Colorado State University's (CSU) top hurricane expert William Gray told AFP. He said there was a 49 percent chance that a tropical storm would track close to Haiti this year.

Gray's team predicts between 11 and 16 tropical storms will form in the Atlantic this year, up from the average nine to 10.

They expect between six and eight of those to become full-fledged hurricanes, by comparison with the usual five to six that gain the designation each year.

The team forecasts up to five of those storms will become major hurricanes, reaching the top three categories in the Saffir-Simpson scale, producing wind speeds ranging from 111 to 155 miles (96 to 155 kilometers) per hour.

The chance that the Caribbean as a whole will be hit by a major hurricane is 58 percent -- above the normal 42 percent probability of the past century, according to their study conducted in December.

Gray said Haiti's vulnerability to a major hurricane this season was not significantly higher than usual.

"The average is around 10 to 15 percent that Haiti would be hit any one year," he said, adding that in 2010 the average "is a little bit higher now, but not much."

"The normally weak infrastructure in Haiti is now virtually non-existent, and so a hurricane would be devastating," CSU team researcher Phil Klotzbach told AFP.

"It should also be pointed out that it does not even take a full-fledged hurricane to do a tremendous amount of damage to Haiti," he added. "Tropical Storm Jeanne in 2004 dropped about 12 inches of rain near Gonaives, and over 2,000 people died."

"For the 2010 hurricane season, we have 49 percent probability of a tropical storm tracking within 50 miles (80 kilometers) of Haiti," Klotzbach said.

International relief organizations working in Haiti are already concerned about the onset of the 2010 rainy season on the island, which begins in April.

French Red Cross president Jean-Francois Mattei on Thursday warned of the impending disaster the season could bring, including "torrential rains, flooding and landslides."

The hurricane season -- from June to November -- often brings death and grief to the Western hemisphere's poorest nation, which is practically denuded of its moisture-absorbing tropical forests.

In the 2008 hurricane season, Haiti was pounded by four storms that left more than 800,000 people homeless and devastated its agriculture.

Last year, Haiti, the Caribbean, and the US mainland were spared from major storms during a relatively calm hurricane season, thanks to the storm-dampening effects in the Atlantic of the El Nino climate pattern.

Gray, whose 25 years of studies have made him one of the leading US experts on hurricanes, predicted that "El Nino activity will be mostly dissipated by August when we get into the hurricane season," favoring greater storm activity.