Hurricane floods Colombia, 50 feared dead

BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) — Hurricane Joan, puzzling forecasters with its unusual path through the southern Caribbean yesterday, unleashed floods in northern Colombia that left about 50 people dead or missing, officials said.

Joan was headed toward the Colombian island resort of San Andres, 500 miles north of the Colombian coast. On Monday, it buffeted northern Colombia with heavy rains and winds of 65 mph before heading north toward Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Honduras.

In Costa Rica, officials said the storm was headed for Puerto Limon, a town of about 8,000 people 105 miles southeast of the capital, San Jose. The officials said they were considering an evacuation.

In the northern Colombian town of Carmen de Bolivar, 360 miles north of Bogota, at least three people were killed Monday, Victor Leon Mendoza of the Bolivar state government said.

A child also was killed and seven people injured Monday in the town of Uribia on Colombia's Guajira Peninsula, police said in a communique. Government officials called foreign reports that 200 were killed in the town "absolutely false."

At 6 p.m. EDT Joan was centered near latitude 11.3 north, longitude 76.9 west, the National Hurricane Center in Coral Gables, Fla., said in a statement. It said the hurricane's center was about 115 miles northwest of Cartegena, Colombia and 350 miles east-southeast of San Andres island. Joan was moving erratically westward at 5-10 mph and the statement said little change was expected overnight.

Maximum sustained winds were near 90 mph, and satellite photographs indicated Joan, the fifth hurricane of the Atlantic season, might be strengthening.

A hurricane watch was in effect for the north coast of Panama, from Punta San Blas to Boca del Toro, and for San Andres, where the storm was expected to arrive Wednesday.

Mendoza told the radio network RCN that 38 people were missing in Carmen de Bolivar. Camilo Cardenas, president of Colombia's National Emergency Committee, said in a news release that about 200 homes there were destroyed or flooded.

In Uribia, a town of 45,000, about 75percent of the dwellings were destroyed or flooded, police said.

Joan's unusual southern path had forecasters puzzling over its possible landfall.

"Joan is one of a kind," said Jim Gross, a meteorologist at the National Hurricane Center. "You just don't see many hurricanes that take this course and hug the coast."

Mark Zimmer, another meteorologist at the hurricane center, said there was strong potential for flash floods in Costa Rica when Joan comes ashore.

Zimmer said winds could be near 100 mph when it hits the coast and "depending on how much populated area there is where the storm does hit land, there could be wind damage."

Heavy rain began yesterday morning in Costa Rica's capital of San Jose, and Eladio Zarate, director of the country's National Meteorological Institute, said there could be flooding on the Atlantic coast overnight.

In Nicaragua, where it had been raining for several days, officials were less certain. "We can't say if the storm will directly affect Nicaragua at this moment," said Pilar Cruz, director of Nicaragua's National Meteorological Service.

As a tropical storm with 45 mph winds, Joan slowly built its strength as it skimmed Colombia's coast, baffling forecasters who had predicted it to weaken.

It reached hurricane force Monday night when maximum sustained winds reached 74 mph and its center began to become better defined, a sign the system could intensify over open water into the western Caribbean, forecasters said.

Joan became the 10th named storm of the 1988 Atlantic hurricane season when top winds passed 39 mph on Oct.11.

Gilbert, the most devastating hurricane in recent years, left more than 300 people dead and caused billions of dollars damage as it tore through Jamaica, the Cayman Islands and Mexico's Yucatan peninsula last month.

The six-month hurricane season ends Nov.30.

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>
> —JIM GROSS, meteorologist at the National Hurricane Center

First lady breaks own promise to stop accepting free gowns

By MERRILL HARTSON
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — First lady Nancy Reagan "broke her little promise" to stop accepting expensive designer gowns and jewelry lent to her by leading couturiers, her press secretary said yesterday.

Spokeswoman Elaine Crispen said that when the practice came into question in 1982, it was decided that Mrs. Reagan's transactions would be reported on President Reagan's financial disclosure form. She also acknowledged that the first lady vowed at the time to discontinue accepting designer clothing.

Sheila Tate, then-press secretary to Mrs. Reagan, told reporters in February 1982 the first lady would stop accepting free clothing. Her purpose was to help the fashion industry, but "she felt it was being misunderstood," Tate said.

"Basically, she set her own little rule," Crispin said yesterday. "She made a promise not to do this again and she broke her little promise because she just didn't feel she had to do it."

Meanwhile, the Office of Government Ethics re-affirmed its 1982 decision that such disclosures on Reagan's financial forms were not technically required under the Ethics in Government Act.

Deputy Director Donald Campbell said, "At this time, there is no belief here in the office that the decision was not the correct one."

But Campbell also said that officials would re-assess the situation "if there's any indication of an error that we made."

The ethics law requires reporting by an official, or by the official's spouse, of any loans in excess of $10,000 in any year.

In 1984, then-Rep.George V.Hansen, R-Idaho, was convicted in federal court of failing to disclose on his ethics form two loans made to his wife by Texas millionaire Nelson Bunker Hunt. Hansen served 11 months in prison.

Questions about Mrs. Reagan's dealings with designers dominated the White House news briefing for a second consecutive day.

Pressed to discuss what implications Mrs. Reagan's clothes-acquisition proclivities might have on the president's tax forms and financial disclosure forms, spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said, "As far as we're concerned, there's no consequence ... for the president's financial disclosure form or his tax forms, period.

"There is no legal problem. There is no ethical problem," he said. "There are all kinds of innuendo and insinuations of illegality and improprieties that are totally incorrect."

In a May 4, 1982, letter, then-White House counsel Fred F.Fielding told J.Jackson Walter, director of the Office of Government Ethics, "We have agreed that the practice of making the clothing and other (personal property) available for the first lady's use does not constitute a 'gift' within the meaning of that term in the Ethics in Government Act of 1978, and therefore it need not be reported in the president's financial disclosure form."

Fielding went on to say that "I advised, nonetheless, that although there is no requirement to list these uses, nor manner in which to evaluate them, the president's report should err on the side of disclosure."

Walter initialed the letter with his approval and returned it to Fielding.

Mrs. Reagan has been borrowing expensive gowns and other merchandise since 1982 without any disclosures, her spokeswoman had acknowledged. But Crispen said these clothes have been returned.

Calif. tobacco manufacturers decide to put warning labels on products

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Cigar and pipe tobacco manufacturers in California have decided to put cancer warnings on their products rather than fight a lawsuit that could have resulted in thousands of dollars in fines.

The manufacturers already were losing money in sales because a chain of stores refused to stock their products and others threatened to follow suit.

The lawsuit was filed, and some products removed, after the manufacturers failed to comply with Proposition 65, a toxins initiative passed by California voters in 1986.

The initiative requires businesses to provide "clear and reasonable" warnings to consumers exposed to chemicals known to cause cancer or birth defects.

"The tobacco manufacturers were very eager to settle and do the right thing," said Duane Peterson, a spokesman for state Attorney General John Van de Kamp.

The manufacturers made the decision Monday. But yesterday, cigars and pipe tobacco were still absent from the shelves of Vons supermarkets, the 345-market statewide chain that became the first supermarket company to announce it would pull the products from it shelves.

"The shelves are still empty; Vons has not seen a copy of the agreement," said spokeswoman Vickie Sanders. She said the grocery company would withhold comment on the agreement until it had been reviewed.

Under the settlement, companies will begin placing warning labels on cigars and pipe tobacco. The state has agreed to waive the fines of $2,500 a day it had threatened to place on every pack of cigars or other tobacco products that did not contain such warnings.

Since passage of Proposition 65, there have been several court fights over which substances should be classified as toxic. Cigarettes, chewing tobacco and snuff all carry federally mandated warnings.

"We want to make it clear that we have been in compliance (with federal warning laws) for a year and a half. We are not part of the lawsuit," said Chris Close, a spokesman for the Smokeless Tobacco Institute in Washington.

The institute represents makers of snuff and chewing tobacco. Close said the state Health and Welfare agency said in a July 1 letter that the warnings on snuff and chewing tobacco "are consistent with the spirit and intended effect" of Proposition 65.

"Although labeling is burdensome, the manufacturers preferred to avoid lengthy and costly litigation," Norman Sharp, president of the Washington-based Cigar Association, said in a statement.

Most cigar products sold nationally will bear the California warning because it would be impossible to label only those sold in California, Sharp said.

The lawsuit, filed Sept.30, prompted at least eight retailers and 25 tobacco companies to agree to the warnings.

Van de Kamp filed the lawsuit about two months after environmental groups said they would seek $1.3billion in fines from stores and manufacturers for violating the Proposition 65 warning requirement.

After Vons announcement of Oct.4, Lucky Stores, with 343 markets across the state, followed by giving tobacco makers 30 days to label their products or have them removed from Lucky's stores.