Tropical Storm Nate kills 22 in Central America, heads for US

Eleven die in Nicaragua and thousands forced to evacuate homes, while in Costa Rica eight are killed, including two children

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Tropical Storm Nate has killed at least 22 people in Central America as it battered the region with heavy rain while heading toward Mexico’s Caribbean resorts and the US Gulf Coast where it could strike as a hurricane this weekend.

Several offshore oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico were evacuated and others had shut production ahead of the storm.

In Nicaragua, at least 11 people died, seven others were reported missing and thousands had to evacuate homes because of flooding, according to the country’s vice president, Rosario Murillo.

Emergency officials in Costa Rica reported that at least eight people had been killed, including two children. Another 17 people were missing, while more than 7,000 had to take refuge from Nate in shelters.

Two young people also drowned in Honduras due to the sudden swell in a river, while a man was killed in a mudslide in El Salvador and another person was missing, emergency services said.
“Sometimes we think we can cross a river and the hardest thing to understand is that we must wait,” Nicaragua’s Murillo told state radio, warning people to avoid dangerous waters. “It’s better to be late than not to get there at all.”

Costa Rica’s government declared a state of emergency, closing schools and all other non-essential services.

Highways in the country were closed due to mudslides and power outages were also reported in parts of the country, where more than 3,500 police were deployed.

The Miami-based National Hurricane Centre said Nate could produce as much as 51cm (20 inches) in some areas of Nicaragua, where schools were also closed.

Nate is predicted to strengthen into a Category 1 hurricane by the time it hits the US Gulf Coast on Sunday, NHC spokesman Dennis Feltgen said.

Blowing maximum sustained winds of 64 km/h (40 mph), Nate was expected to move across eastern Honduras on Thursday and enter the northwestern Caribbean Sea through the night.

The storm will be near hurricane intensity when it approaches Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula late on Friday, where up to 20cm (8 inches) of rain were possible, the NHC said.

US officials from Florida to Texas told residents on Thursday to prepare for the storm. A state of emergency was declared for 29 Florida counties and the city of New Orleans.

“The threat of the impact is increasing, so folks along the northern Gulf Coast should be paying attention to this thing,” the NHC’s Feltgen said.

Some offshore oil producers in the Gulf of Mexico, including Chevron, BP plc, Exxon Mobil Corp, Royal Dutch Shell Plc and Statoil, had shut production or were withdrawing personnel from their offshore Gulf platforms, they said.