

### **III. NATURAL DISASTERS IN JAMAICA: 1692-1988**

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## NATURAL DISASTERS IN JAMAICA

The Jamaica Government's Office of Disaster Preparedness has prepared a list of disasters which have affected the Island since 1692. In those nearly 300 years, just over 200 disasters were reported. These are mostly hurricanes and floods, though a few droughts, earthquakes, fires and accidents have been included. Some of these were very severe. Here is a short account of some of these disasters:

- ▶ 1692 - The earthquake which destroyed Port Royal occurred on 7 June 1692. The shock was felt islandwide, but more of the 3,000 deaths caused were in the town of Port Royal. A part of the town was swallowed up by the sea, and more than 2,000 houses were destroyed.
- ▶ 1723 - The area around Moneague in the parish of St. Ann was flooded to a depth of 75 feet by rains, which lasted for only three-and-a-half hours.
- ▶ 1812 - An earthquake on 11 November 1812 damaged almost every house in Kingston. Serious damage was also done in Spanish Town and other towns. Several persons were killed.
- ▶ 1862 - Disastrous floods occurred in some areas of the island in May and June 1862.
- ▶ 1864-65 - Between 1864 and 1865, a drought resulted in severe food shortages and starvation in some districts of Jamaica.
- ▶ 1879 - This was a very wet year with periods of flooding. In October 1879, more than 180 perished as a result of severe flooding of the Yallahs, Dry, Hope, Dallas, and other rivers and gullies. Houses, crops and livestock were washed away.
- ▶ 1899 - From 23-30 October 1899, a hurricane moving some distance off the south coast of the island caused severe damage to crops. Savanna-la-Mar was under water for 2 days, as 30 inches of rain fell in 40 hours and the town was battered by high tides and rough seas. In November-December 1899, and January 1890 heavy rains again caused death and property damage in many parts of the island.
- ▶ 1907 - The Great Kingston Earthquake of 14 January 1907 was accompanied by a fire. It is estimated that 1,200 people died and 90,000 were left homeless. Buff Bay and Port Maria were also badly damaged.
- ▶ 1909 - Between 4 and 12 November 1909, more than 100 inches of rain fell in parts of St. Thomas.

In upper Clarendon, the Pedro Run River rose 30 feet above its normal level. The island's road system was wrecked and massive landslides added to the damage. At least 533 persons died.

- ▶ **1915-27** - In each of these years, some part of Jamaica was hit by heavy rain or hurricane. The hurricane of 15-17 August 1916 left thousands homeless and totally destroyed the island's banana industry. It is estimated that 17 people died in that hurricane.
- ▶ **1928-29** - At least six parishes suffered from drought during many months of these two years. There was a shortage of food in many districts.
- ▶ **1932** - In November 1932, a hurricane with winds estimated at more than 200 miles an hour devastated parts of Cuba, the Cayman Islands and Jamaica.
- ▶ **1937** - Between the 20th and 24th of November, torrential rains caused flooding along the north coast of Jamaica. In one 24-hour period, Swift River and Balcarres district in the parish of Portland reported 16 to 24 inches of rain. Seventy persons drowned and the damage to roads, bridges and farms was severe. On 31 November, there was a landslide at Millbank in the John Crow Mountains of Portland. A large section of the mountain-side collapsed, completely burying at least 150 acres of land, including a small community.

- ▶ **1940** - Again in the month of November, the north-eastern parishes of St. Mary and Portland were affected by heavy rain and flooding. A church at Swift River was washed away, drowning about 50 persons who had taken shelter there. In all, at least 125 persons lost their lives, most by drowning, some by landslides. Greenvale in Portland recorded 27 inches of rain in 24 hours.
- ▶ **1951** - During the night of 17 and 18 August, Hurricane Charlie swept Jamaica's south coast with winds of 125 m.p.h. Total material damage was set at \$50 million. Thousands of houses were destroyed and 154 persons lost their lives. The parish of St. Thomas was worst affected; the town of Morant Bay was 80% destroyed. One village lost 159 of its 165 houses. The island's banana industry was almost totally destroyed, and the coconut and food crop industries were badly damaged.
- ▶ **1963** - Between 5-7 October, Hurricane Flora affected the island, leaving 11 dead and damage of \$12 million, due mainly to flooding.
- ▶ **1965-8** - Prolonged drought was experienced.
- ▶ **1972** - On 2 September, Hurricane David affected the Eastern half of the Island with heavy rains which caused flooding.

- ▶ 1973 - Tropical Storm Gilda passed west of Jamaica and did extensive damage on the South Coast, killing 6 persons. This system was spawned by a Tropical Depression in the North East Caribbean. St. Thomas, Westmoreland and the Montego Bay area were greatly affected. In Trelawny and St. James, rivers were in spate, and landslides and road blocks occurred.
- ▶ 1979 - On 12 June, rains from a Tropical Depression affected mostly western parishes, left 39 dead and 35,000 homeless and destitute.
- ▶ 1980 - August 5-6 brought Hurricane Allen. The North Coast was hardest hit. Storm surges of 40 feet in height were experienced at Galina. Ninety percent of the banana crop was destroyed. Six persons died; 4,000-5,000 were left homeless.
- ▶ 1986 - Between 31 May and 6 June, the island came under the influence of a complex weather system. There was severe flooding in southern parishes. Fifty-nine persons were killed and extensive damage done to crops, soil, roads and houses.
- ▶ 1987 - Rains in November caused flooding in some areas of the island.
- ▶ 1988 - For 5 days in September 1988, rains accompanying Hurricane Gilbert deluged towns, villages and farmland from east to west along the whole width of Jamaica. Maximum wind speed was about 115 m.p.h. and damage to crops, houses and farm buildings was estimated at \$4 billion. In the parish of St. Thomas, 90% of buildings were damaged. At Langely in north St. Andrew, more than 30 inches of rain fell during the five days. About 80,000 persons were forced to seek shelter at public centres. The island's banana fields were all destroyed and there was almost a complete destruction of food crops, coconuts and other tree crops. Forty-five persons lost their lives in hurricane-related incidents. Loss of life was lower, however, than on many previous occasions of natural disasters, mainly because many householders had taken reasonable hurricane precautions. There was extensive damage to roads, bridges, and other infrastructural facilities in the island.