

Powerful Cyclone Heads for Mining Town

PERTH, Australia (AP) — Australia's major iron ore port was shut down and residents along a remote stretch of the country's west coast ordered to take shelter as a powerful cyclone bore down on the region on Wednesday, bringing drenching rains and lashing winds.

Cyclone Rusty, a slow-moving and fierce storm with winds gusting up to 230 kilometers (140 miles) per hour at its center, was trudging toward the Western Australia coast and was expected to hit the mining town of Port Hedland in the evening. The outer edge of the storm was battering the coast with wind gusts of 120 kilometers (75 miles) per hour, the Bureau of Meteorology said.

The storm's slow pace was sparking fears of flooding, with up to 400 millimeters (16 inches) of rain predicted to fall within 24 hours.

"This is a very long, drawn-out, slow nightmare," Port Hedland councillor Bill Dziombak said. "Over the last 48 hours we've had gradually increasing gales, gusty winds and heavy, heavy rain."

The port, which the nation's mining giants use to export iron ore, was closed on Tuesday and officials weren't sure when shipments would be able to resume. Iron ore miner Fortescue Metals said all its port and rail operations in the region were locked down and workers told to stay inside their homes.

"It's hard to say when the port will reopen because it seems to be a very big cyclone," Port Hedland Port Authority spokeswoman Albina Skender said. "Until we're given the all-clear, everyone is safely at home and the port is evacuated."

Emergency officials issued a red alert for those living along a 200-kilometer (120-mile) stretch of coast, ordering residents to stay indoors until the worst of the storm passes. Around 15,000 people live in the Port Hedland area.

"This one's a bit of a beauty," Port Hedland Deputy Mayor George Daccache said. "It's going to be a pain waiting for two to three days for this to come and go."

Editor's update: Australia's Port Hedland has escaped the worst of the cyclone. More details can be found here: <http://chem.info/News/2013/02/Australia-s-Port-Hedland-spared-worst-of-cyclone> [1]

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