

AMSTERDAM (Reuters) - Hurricane Irma has caused enormous devastation to the Dutch side of the Caribbean island of Saint Martin and cut off electricity and gas, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said on Thursday. Most communications with the outside world are being conducted via the military, he said, adding that there was no clarity on victims. The Dutch navy, which has two ships stationed off the coast of the island, tweeted images gathered by helicopter showing damaged houses, hotels and boats. French authorities have counted at least eight dead on the French side of the island. Dutch Interior Minister Ronald Plasterk said he briefly had contact with Saint Martin's prime minister but communications are sporadic. He said nine patients at a hospital in the country had been evacuated by Dutch military helicopter. Sint Maarten is an independent nation within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, with a population of around 40,000 about the same as the French side. Images of the country's Juliana Airport showed the landing strips appeared intact, though the navy said the airport is unreachable for now. Andre van der Kamp, commander of the Dutch ship Zeeland, tweeted that the Zeeland and Pelikaan would be trying to moor on Sint Maarten to deliver emergency aid on Thursday, but they needed to complete a safety check of the port first.