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MERCURY

# Woman trapped for three days in sunken yacht

By KATHY MOLONEY

**A** WOMAN survived for three days in underwater air pockets when her sunken yacht was trapped under other damaged boats after Hurricane Luis ripped through St Maarten Island in the West Indies.

While several Durban families are still trying desperately to contact family and friends on the small island near Puerto Rico which was hit by the worst storm in a century, stories of miraculous escapes are beginning to filter through.

The hurricane that wreaked havoc in the island's lagoon, sinking and wrecking most of the approximately 1 000 yachts believed to have been moored there - many of which were South African - officially killed nine people.

However, officials acknowledge that several people are still missing and that many bodies may be buried in debris and beneath overturned boats.

One who survived was found "by accident".

The woman - as yet unnamed - was found when six sunken vessels which were blocking the entrance to the lagoon had to be cleared by divers.

"The trapped woman survived for three days by moving, fractionally, from air pocket to air pocket," said Mrs Linda Coetzer, a South African who has lived on the island for several years.

"Her boat was one of six that sunk near the drawbridge of the lagoon and had to be cleared because it was blocking the entrance."

Mrs Coetzer said she was unsure of the woman's nationality.

Worried family members who had not heard from sons and husbands since the storm hit last Wednesday contacted The Mercury yesterday.

According to a list describing the conditions of 183 private yachts - compiled by maritime rescue authorities on St Maartens - which was given to The Mercury yesterday, the whereabouts of crews from 44 yachts is unknown.

Twenty-four of these yachts are damaged but have been recovered. Eight vessels are missing but



**OVERBOARD:** Durban yachtsman Daryl Howell dived overboard to retrieve a dragging anchor when Hurricane Luis hit St Maartens on Wednesday.

authorities are unsure whether they left the area before the storm.

Another 12 boats are known to have sunk.

The lists do not contain the nationalities of the boats and do

not include charter boats. One charter company lost 40 of its 60 boats in the storm.

Hundreds of people - including many South African yachtsmen who lost their boats - are being housed in churches and other buildings, said Mrs Coetzer.

One Durban family, contacted by their son from St Maarten on Sunday night, told how he survived after diving off his yacht during the storm to recover a dragged anchor.

The man, Mr Daryl Howell, 32, threw himself overboard when he realised one of his three anchors had broken loose and his yacht - which took him four-and-a-half years to build in the back garden of his parents' Durban North home - would be wrecked.

□ Another 14-page list has been made available to Mrs Coetzer on the island and South Africans can contact her for the latest information about missing relatives. Her telephone number is (095-995) 42-799.

Red Cross International is coordinating rescue efforts. They can be contacted at 0931-7038-46880.