

Power outages, gas lines, hunger fuel Floridians' anger after Hurricane Wilma

“People had ample time to prepare,” says Gov. Jeb Bush

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Four days after Hurricane Wilma hit South Florida, close to 4 million people remain without power and the phone system is largely inoperable. The statewide death toll climbed to 10 on Thursday, and more than 2,900 people remained housed in 25 shelters spread over 11 counties.

As of Wednesday evening, nearly 1.6 million Florida Public Lighting (FPL) customers in Broward and Miami-Dade counties alone were still in the dark. The utility company reported that of 240 substations knocked out statewide by Wilma, 85 were still not back on line. FPL predicted that it would take until November 15 for 95 percent of power to be restored, but that it might take until November 22 for power to be brought back to all of Broward and northern Miami-Dade counties.

People scrambled to get hold of dwindling supplies of food, water, ice and building supplies. Lines stretched for miles outside gas stations as people waited for hours to fill up fuel containers, with some people sleeping overnight in their cars.

Classrooms were empty as school buildings remained in the dark. With power lines down, traffic signals out and roads covered with debris, travel was treacherous. Many of the tens of thousands of retirees living in high-rises with inoperable elevators were stranded and unsure where to turn for help.

As emergency supplies ran out at 9 of Miami-Dade County's 11 distribution centers, Mayor Carlos Alvarez said he was “disappointed and angered” at the response by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Alvarez complained that emergency inventory had been inadequate. While FEMA officials said that more “supplies were on the way... they honestly can't tell you when you are going to get (them).” He added, “It's how the system operates. It is a bureaucracy that's very unwieldy.”

Alvarez said red tape at FEMA was preventing local authorities from distributing supplies from Homestead, Florida, south of Miami, where FEMA had deposited them. Deliveries of emergency supplies were also disrupted by intermittent cell phone service, making communication difficult between government officials and truck drivers. Other drivers lost their way.

All of this added to already extremely difficult conditions for the hundreds of thousands of people struggling to regroup and provide for their families under conditions of no electricity, no refrigeration and diminishing fuel supplies.

Marcia Jenkins, from Oakland Park, north of Fort Lauderdale,

told CNN Wednesday that she had tried for two days to get ice, to no avail. “Yesterday we stood in line from 12 to about 4, and we didn't get any ice. I gave up and left,” Jenkins said. “So I figured I'd come today and I got to the end of the line and... no more ice; they said, ‘Wait till the next truck.’”

Claudia Shaw, who waited in a line at a Sam's Club gas station in Miami, told Associated Press, “This is like the Third World. We live in a state where we suffer from these storms every year. Where is the planning?” Shaw, a native of Colombia in South America, said she had never seen such conditions in her home country.

Nearly two months since Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and the Gulf Coast on August 29, millions of people are yet again experiencing the chaotic and tragic aftermath of a major hurricane. And once again the response of government authorities has been characterized by a lack of preparation and indifference, leaving area residents wondering when conditions will improve and the nation and world asking why the US is so terribly ill-equipped to deal with hurricanes.

While the damage and human suffering inflicted by this latest storm have not been as severe as that caused by Hurricane Katrina, Wilma was a major hurricane, making landfall in South Florida as a category 3 storm with 125 mph winds and pounding waves. The storm's course had been charted by meteorologists for days, and at least 17 had been left dead in its wake in the Caribbean and on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, where thousands of American tourists remain stranded.

Following the huge political fallout from the Bush administration's and FEMA's response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the state government of Florida, under Republican Jeb Bush, the president's brother, had pledged to make better preparations for Wilma. Evacuations of threatened areas proceeded in a generally orderly fashion and FEMA officials promised prompt and effective relief.

Before the hurricane, the Florida governor had said all emergency distribution centers would be set up within 24 hours after the storm hit. But nearly four days later, some centers were still not operational and some of those that had opened were running out of supplies. “We didn't meet those expectations,” he admitted.

In an attempt to deflect attention from FEMA—and the Bush

White House—Governor Jeb Bush commented at a news conference Wednesday, “Don’t blame FEMA. This is our responsibility.”

He then proceeded to chastise Florida residents for not making adequate preparations. “People had ample time to prepare,” he said. “It isn’t that hard to get 72 hours’ worth of food and water.”

The governor’s arrogant statements were met with an angry response from people waiting for hours on end for provisions. Single mother Ruth Granados, seven months pregnant, said work and family responsibilities left her little time to prepare before the storm. She waited in line for more than nine hours on Wednesday for some free ice and water. “I feel like I’m going to give birth right here in the parking lot,” she said.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff echoed Jeb Bush’s disparaging remarks when he addressed the media on Wednesday after a helicopter tour to survey the damaged region. “People have got to take some responsibility for preparing themselves,” he said. “We need to focus first on those who can’t help themselves, not able-bodied people who didn’t help themselves.”

In fact—as in any natural disaster—the ability of large sections of Floridians to “help themselves” is directly related to their economic conditions. Millions in the stricken region are working class and poor, or retirees living on fixed incomes.

A measure of the indifference and incompetence of FEMA and the government—at both the federal and state level—is the damning fact that one year after the 2004 hurricane season, when four storms struck the state, some 20,000 people are still living in trailers brought in by FEMA as “temporary” accommodations.

Hurricane Wilma came ashore Monday morning 20 miles south of the exclusive community of Naples, in Collier County, where the median single-family home price for July 2005 stood at \$490,400, according to the Florida Association of Realtors. In contrast to conditions in working class neighborhoods and trailer parks, residences here are built to exacting construction standards to withstand hurricane-force winds, and most homes escaped major damage.

However, homes in Collier County outside of Naples and Marco Island (another upscale area) saw widespread damage, with a total of 617 destroyed. All but two of these were mobile homes.

While it is well documented that trailer homes are unlikely to withstand the impact of a category 2 hurricane, hundreds of thousands of people throughout the Gulf Coast region continue to live in these structures. Similarly, in areas in the US where tornadoes are most likely to hit—in the Midwest and Plains states—hundreds of thousands live in mobile homes due to the simple fact that they cannot afford to live in more stable structures.

The chaos in the aftermath of Hurricane Wilma has once again highlighted the reality of capitalist social relations in America. Under conditions where the needs of the public—including the physical safety of vast sections of people—are entirely subordinated to the accumulation of private wealth for a financial aristocracy, such natural disasters are bound to produce widespread human suffering.

Last-minute efforts on the part of state and federal authorities cannot counter the erosion of basic infrastructure and the

dismantling of public agencies resulting from a quarter century in which the social wealth has been plundered by the ruling elite—under Democratic as well as Republican administrations.

In areas such as Florida and the Gulf Coast, where hurricanes are expected to increase in both number and intensity in coming years, what does the future portend? Ordinary people are being told, in effect, “Get used to the idea that every year or so your home may be destroyed and your savings wiped out. It’s your problem, not ours.”

The response of FEMA and the federal government to the recent hurricanes has demonstrated that the government is ill-prepared to defend the US population as a whole, not only against natural disasters, but against a flu pandemic or other crisis.

This is a result not simply of the policies of a single administration, or even a single party. It is ultimately rooted in the fundamental conflict between the needs of a modern, complex, mass society and an economic system based on private ownership of the major productive forces and the anarchy of the market—the “free market” principles that have been trumpeted by the American media and political system for decades as the end-all and be-all of human civilization. In fact, these capitalist foundations make impossible the development of a rationally planned and humane allocation of social resources.

Indeed, in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma, the American people and the world are confronted with the repulsive spectacle of the Bush administration—with the complicity of congressional Democrats—rushing to cut federal spending for health care, nutrition and other social needs to offset the costs of relief and reconstruction. Those expenditures, meanwhile, are being assiduously tailored to provide a profit windfall for corporations—in the first instance, those with close links to the Bush White House.

On Thursday, George W. Bush made a public relations jaunt to the stricken area in South Florida—taking time out from the crisis surrounding his administration with the withdrawal of the Harriet Miers Supreme Court nomination and the imminent threat of indictments of White House aides in the CIA leak probe.

He spoke at a supply distribution center alongside Governor Bush, greeting volunteers from the Southern Baptist Convention, a religious group that had traveled from Tennessee to assist in the relief effort. The audience was selected so as to advance Bush’s drive for federal funding of religious organizations.

The president said he had come to ensure that federal and state responses “dovetail.” This was a coded way of reiterating that his administration has no intention of mounting a national, federally funded and coordinated program to address the desperate poverty and crumbling infrastructure exposed by Katrina and the hurricanes that have followed.



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