

Devastation from California wildfires comes into focus as some blazes are contained

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Six days of massive wildfires have left a devastating human toll in Southern California. The blazes have charred close to 500,000 acres, or about three quarters the size of the state of Rhode Island. Wildfires also flared on the Mexican side of the border, as far south as the city of Ensenada.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection reported on Friday that weather conditions were forecast to improve across the hardest hit areas, with 14 of 23 wildfires mostly contained. The biggest of the fires, including the Witch fire, east of San Diego, the Harris fire, along the Mexican border, and the Santiago Canyon fire, in Orange County, are only 30 percent contained and continue to expand their destruction. Arson is suspected in two of the fires.

About 1,800 homes have been destroyed, mostly in San Diego and San Bernardino counties, and some 28,000 homes are still in danger. Conservative estimates place the number of evacuated over the last five days at more than 500,000, the largest mass evacuation in the history of this state.

The official death toll is now stands at 17, including 7 who died in the evacuation. On Thursday, the charred bodies of 4 people believed to be undocumented immigrants were found in a canyon east of San Diego. Dozens more have been admitted to area burn centers. The number of injured rose to 85 on Friday, including at least 61 firefighters.

The evacuated are slowly being allowed to go home, many finding their homes reduced to ashes. Qualcomm Stadium, home of the San Diego Chargers football team, which at one point sheltered 15,000 evacuees, is down to 700. Some of these people have been transferred to other shelters in an attempt to empty the stadium for this Sunday's game against Houston.

The environmental disaster is exposing the state of social relations in California and the US. A preliminary assessment of the human toll makes clear that, except for the wealthy, thousands now face years of hardship from the loss of their homes and jobs. Arguably, the majority of the fires were the result of natural forces that are not always predictable. However, the resulting devastation involves political and economic causes that are the result of years of budget cutbacks and social inequality in California.

Efforts are being made by the Bush administration to use its response to this tragedy to make up for the government's failure to act in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. One can predict, however, that for most victims of the fires, the paltry sums appropriated by federal and state officials will do little to make up for the loss of homes, jobs, vehicles and other possessions.

In San Diego County, 500 homes were destroyed, together with 100 commercial businesses. The cost of homes destroyed in San Diego County alone is likely to top \$1 billion. In Los Angeles County, two dozen homes have burnt plus two bridges and several commercial buildings. In Orange County, nine homes and 12 commercial buildings were destroyed. In Ventura County, three homes and 12 commercial properties were burnt. Three hundred and twenty homes were destroyed in San Bernardino

County.

The fires continued to burn in southern California on Thursday and Friday. The strong winds that fanned the flames of brush and forest fires subsided on Thursday. On Friday, winds from the ocean cooled the region and made the air more humid, conditions that contribute to slowing down the spread of the fires. However, hundreds of firefighters continue to do battle, and many of the fires have yet to be contained.

The Santiago fire in Irvine, California, was expanding in a northwesterly direction into the Cleveland National Forest, possibly threatening the city of Colton, a working class community. That fire is only 50 percent contained, and 600 firefighters are battling the blaze. Another 600 firefighters are combating the Arrowhead Lake fire, where many vacation homes have been destroyed. The fire threatens the winter resort towns of Arrowhead, Big Bear and Crestline.

In coastal San Diego County, which borders with Mexico, a crescent of four major fires surrounds the City of San Diego on the north and east. Major roads have been closed. Six thousand acres of Avocado trees, one third of the California crop, have been destroyed.

As is common in natural disasters, thousands of ordinary citizens in California and elsewhere volunteered to help (some by turning their own homes into places of shelter). Many others donated blood, gave money and donated clothing, blankets and cots.

The San Diego *Union Tribune* and other regional newspapers have highlighted this spirit of solidarity and the optimism of many of the evacuees. For example, Wednesday's *Tribune* published a comment by staff writer Matt Sauer entitled "Regardless of ZIP code, we're all in this together," in which he celebrates that San Diegans from all walks of life share shelters, following news of the disaster on television.

The reality, however, is quite different. Authorities at Qualcomm Stadium, which sheltered 12,000 during the first two days of the fires, made it clear that the undocumented would not be welcome, asking evacuees to produce Social Security cards. An extended family of six undocumented immigrants and their US-born daughter were wrongly accused of stealing supplies set out for the evacuees. When it became evident that no such crime had taken place, Qualcomm authorities advised immigration officials, who entered the stadium and took custody of the immigrants, who were summarily deported.

The incident served as a warning to all immigrants to stay away from the shelters. On Thursday and Friday, calls flooded into Spanish morning talk radio stations from people outraged about the treatment of immigrants in the disaster. Many of these callers had made donations to the Red Cross and other agencies. It is likely that the policy toward immigrants had been planned in advance by local authorities and the Department of Homeland Security.

Many of the undocumented worked as servants in the homes of the wealthy. Others work in the tomato and avocado fields, often for less than the state minimum wage. In one case, reported in the Los Angeles Spanish language weekly *Impacto USA*, David and Guadalupe Martinez and their

young children were forced to flee the burning home where they worked taking care of the horses, dogs and rabbits while the owners were on vacation. Some immigrants were abandoned by their bosses and left, with no transportation, to fend for themselves. Immigrant workers were reported to be using bicycles to flee from the rapidly advancing flames.

The Los Angeles daily *La Opinión* quoted activist Enrique Morones, leader of the immigrant rights organization Los Angeles Sin Fronteras (LASF), who said that 1,500 workers were employed in agriculture, construction and gardening in the fire-affected regions of San Diego County. In many cases, these workers received no warning of the evacuation. In the inland immigrant shantytown near McGonicle Canyon, on the road that joins San Diego with Las Vegas, many workers took their chances with the fire, rather than evacuate to the shelters.

Morones said: "In many cases the flames were less than half a mile away, but no one came to their aid. Smoke covered the cliffs in which they live in precarious homes, made of wood and plastic sheeting, but no one even gave them dust masks." In some farms, supervisors insisted that workers remain on the job until the last possible minute, breathing ash-filled smoke.

It was not until LASF volunteers showed up, on the third day of the blaze, that the immigrants, some of whom lived less than 15 miles from the Qualcomm Stadium, received aid. Volunteer doctors evacuated those who had developed severe respiratory problems.

While many of those that lived in wealthy suburbs to the East and North of San Diego have enough insurance coverage and will be able to rebuild their homes, the non-immigrant inhabitants of the eastern part of the county, many of whom were apartment dwellers or working and middle class homeowners—many of them elderly—are either not entitled to insurance payments or government loans or are underinsured.

The residents of at least 11 nursing homes were evacuated in San Diego County. While some have returned to three of those institutions, 578 were still displaced on Thursday night. Another 8 to 10 nursing homes may yet have to be evacuated if the fires continue to spread. Four elderly people died in the evacuation itself, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. Two died being moved to medical facilities, the other two at or nearby hotels where they sought shelter.

On the other side of the class divide are the very wealthy potential fire victims, who have ongoing contracts with private "fire departments" that, with only a few hours' notice, show up to save the owners' homes. One such company, Firebreak, claims to have saved a dozen homes in Malibu, Arrowhead, Orange County and San Diego. "We are saving homes that may average \$3 to \$5 million," Firebreak Chief Executive Jim Aamodt told the *Los Angeles Times*.

In San Diego County, where many of the wealthy are notorious for their opposition to funding public services, this is a way of buying one's way around underfunded public services. At the same time as firefighters across Southern California spoke out about the lack of trucks, helicopters and planes to fight the fires, companies such as Firebreak have enough resources to protect their rich clients. Resources that should be available to society at large are thus hijacked for the super-rich.

Combined with the destructive power of the windstorm and drought, the lack of an adequate firefighting system added to the destruction. In a cost-cutting move, San Diego eliminated its county fire department in the 1970s and replaced it with a system of 10 community-based volunteer departments. The move coincided with an increase in the development of suburban housing in fire-prone areas. The City of San Diego did retain its fire department, but it has never been adequately funded.

Despite the attention supposedly given to so-called first-responders since September 11, 2001, the Bush administration has cut funds from grant programs initially set up to buy fire trucks, protective clothing, breathing apparatus, water tanks and other equipment under the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program established by Congress in 2000

to help fire departments that lack money and manpower. The program was designed to assist those volunteer departments that primarily fight wildfires and that are not supported by an urban taxpayer base.

In his first two budget proposals, Bush put no money into the program. Congress did appropriate \$750 million for this purpose. Since September 11, 2001, urban fire departments have applied for and received some of this money, mostly to upgrade communications equipment, shifting resources away from the volunteer departments.

The Bush administration let it be known that it considered wildfires a low priority when it proposed to cut the grants by one third in 2005, to \$500 million. "What we are trying to do overall in the Homeland Security budget...is to focus resources a bit better on terrorism-preparedness programs," said Chad Kolton, of the White House's Office of Management and Budget, in 2005.

Among those feeling the shift in priorities most directly were the San Diego County fire departments. Dave Nissen, chief of the San Diego Rural Fire Protection District, which is charged with protecting a 720-square-mile area along the Mexican border, including Jamul, Descanso, and East Otay Mesa, areas very hard hit by fires in 2003, indicated in 2005 that his department's equipment was rapidly aging with 20-year-old engines that are normally replaced after 10 or 12 years. "It is a matter of band-aiding them together when something breaks," said Nissen.

Conditions are even worse today. Many of the helicopters being used to fight the fires are Vietnam-era. Of 150 new fire trucks promised in 2004 by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, only 19 had been ordered when the wildfires hit this time.

President George Bush visited the area Thursday, accompanied by Governor Schwarzenegger, flying over part of the affected areas. In the course of his brief, four-hour visit, Bush praised the governor's leadership and declared most of Southern California a major disaster area, making it eligible for loans to businesses and homeowners.

Bush's visit evoked images of Hurricane Katrina, when the president flew over the city and briefly spoke at the New Orleans airport, far from the victims. In an attempt to reverse that image, this time the visit included a stopover at Escondido, north of the city, and a conversation with one of the victims of the fire, to whom the president handed out the phone number for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

In a comment eerily echoing what he once told the victims of Katrina, Bush commented, "We're not going to forget you in Washington, D.C." More than two years after the hurricane disaster, tens if not hundreds of thousands of residents remain displaced, and large sections of working class areas in New Orleans are still in shambles.



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