Recovery efforts continue after South Carolina flooding

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Nineteen people are now confirmed dead as a result of the historic flood in the state of South Carolina, with two dead in North Carolina. South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley has declined to put more concrete numbers on the financial impact of damages, but initial estimates place the cost at more than $1 billion.

With the storm now over, some parts of the state are slowly beginning to return to normal. Following a week of almost total paralysis, recovery efforts have begun to revive the capital city of Columbia. Major highways have been reopened, curfews have been lifted and many businesses are back at work. Classes have resumed at the University of South Carolina in downtown Columbia for the first time in a week.

Clean-up crews are working to remove debris throughout the state. In Columbia alone, 2.4 million pounds of debris have been picked up. Boil water advisories have been repealed for 10 percent of Columbia's 375,000 water customers, though it will likely be several weeks before clean water is restored for the entire city. Some 37,000 South Carolina residents have applied for FEMA assistance, and approximately 300 continue to live in emergency shelters.

Urgent repairs are currently underway at the Columbia Canal, which serves as the main water supply for half the city. The canal was breached in two places, prompting emergency measures by the National Guard. They dropped hundreds of sandbags into the canal from helicopters, while contractors raced to complete a temporary rock dam that would prevent more of the water supply from escaping.

The reservoir fed by the canal had been reduced to just 13 million gallons of water following the breach, far below its ideal minimum level of 30 million gallons.

At a press conference about the canal on Tuesday, Columbia Mayor Stephen Benjamin vowed that, "We will not rest at all until we find all the funds needed to rebuild for the 21st century."

While Benjamin searches for funds, it should be recalled that in the past three years, $12 million has been pulled from the city's water fund for other initiatives, including providing incentives to attract businesses to the state. This year alone, $2.8 million has been diverted from the water fund to pay for police and fire services. The state government diverts funds from the water system so frequently that last month the Supreme Court of South Carolina felt compelled to warn the state legislature not to use money allocated for the water supply as a "slush fund."

In addition to the inability of the underfunded water system to withstand the storms and subsequent flooding, 29 of the state's dams have been breached and many more remain at risk.

Following the flood, the Association of State Dam Safety Officials republished its 2014 statistics on South Carolina dams. They report that the South Carolina Dams and Reservoirs Safety Program "regulates 2,499 dams, of which 180 are classified as high-hazard-potential structures." That means that if any of those 180 dams were to fail, it would likely lead to a loss of life.

No less than 86 percent of South Carolina's state-regulated dams are privately owned. Each of the state's dam safety officers is responsible for approximately 380 dams. State funding for dam safety amounts to $260,000, or $104 per dam. The national average is $611 per dam.

Such poor conditions are by no means unique to South Carolina. The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) presented the nation's dams with a grade of "D" in its 2013 report card for American

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infrastructure. “The average age of the 84,000 dams in the country is 52 years old,” the ASCE reports. Almost 14,000 of them were classified as “high-hazard” in 2012. Two thousand are “deficient high-hazard dams.” To repair just the high-hazard structures would cost $21 billion.

Despite this, no more than a pittance can be granted for the funding of essential maintenance and repairs to basic infrastructure. The “thousand year” storm that struck South Carolina may have been a natural disaster, but its impact was magnified by the state’s dilapidated dams, bridges and roadways.

Before sessions ended in June, state lawmakers could not reach an agreement on a bill to allocate $400 million for road maintenance. Had they done so, any road improvements would have been funded with a gas tax that would have added significantly to the already severe financial burden on the working class of a state where the median household income stands at $42,376.

Meanwhile, South Carolina’s wealthiest resident, Anita Zucker, CEO of InterTech Group, has amassed a fortune worth $2.6 billion. Darla Moore, a partner in the Rainwater private investment firm, is worth $2.3 billion. She owns homes in Charleston and Lake City, South Carolina. Billionaire Jude Reyes of Reyes Holdings, which owns South Carolina’s Lee Distributors, recently purchased a home on Kiawah Island for $20.25 million.

There are many more avoidable disasters waiting to happen throughout the United States. While enormous sums of money remain in the hands of a small, wealthy elite, inadequate housing, insufficient storm warning systems and crumbling infrastructure have left large sections of the population in danger.

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