Louisiana: Seven dead, tens of thousands forced to flee as region braces for more flooding

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The historic flooding that has killed at least seven people and forced thousands to flee and attempt harrowing rescues continued to sweep across southern Louisiana Monday night. The area was bracing for even higher waters.

The National Weather Service (NWS) reported that the Amite River, one of a group of rivers and creeks that has poured over its banks, crested Monday in Baton Rouge, but was still rising south of the capital.

On Sunday, President Obama issued a federal disaster declaration for the entire state after seven confirmed deaths and more than 20,000 people were rescued from stranded homes and vehicles.

More than 10,000 people have been forced to find overnight shelter in the past few days and there are still many more trapped by the floods in some areas. The sudden and torrential downpour began on Friday and has since broken numerous river gauge records, some by several feet.

The majority of the deaths since Friday happened as residents attempted to escape their flooding neighborhoods. The deaths included an elderly woman who drowned attempting to drive her grandchild away from the floods and a 20-year-old woman whose vehicle was swept away by floodwaters on Louisiana Highway 10 as she attempted to evacuate.

By Sunday evening, the Baton Rouge River Center and Celtic Media Studios were opened up as shelters to evacuees across the area. Governor John Bel Edwards said Monday that more than 12,000 people were staying in shelters.

Across the state some 40,000 houses and business are without electricity and four major school systems, including Louisiana State University, are currently closed. In the Baton Rouge area, over 4,500 more homes are expected to be without electricity, as electrical crews must cut the power to several major grids in order to work around the slowly receding floodwaters to avoid an even more massive blackout.

KDAF meteorologist Kevin Roth said on Monday that the disaster would be ongoing. “The flooding isn’t over, because all the water that’s upstream has to flow downstream,” he said. “The river and the creeks will probably continue to rise.”

Southern Louisiana has had more rain since Friday than some parts of the country see in over three years. This is the second 21-inch-plus rainfall incident in the state so far this year. The NWS extended flood warnings through Wednesday and Thursday for some parts of the state.

Since the beginning of the year, Governor Edwards has overseen drastic cuts to public services, including to health care and higher education. The state’s tax plan overwhelmingly burdens the poor and working-class citizens while the rich remain unscathed and infrastructure crumbles.

In the almost 11 years since Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana still suffers from the same issues that made that storm so disastrous. Levees are still inadequate and poorly maintained and the roads and bridges are in a constant state of disrepair.

All this is taking place as catastrophic weather occurrences have become more and more frequent in recent years due to global climate change. Near-record high sea surface temperatures in the Gulf of Mexico recorded earlier this month led to a massive storm system slowly making its way across Gulf States, creating extreme flooding events such as occurred this

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weekend in Louisiana and Mississippi.

The temperatures in the Gulf, the highest they have ever been, have poured massive amounts of evaporated water into the atmosphere, creating devastating storms in the regions around the Gulf. Meteorologists expect events like these to become more and more common as greenhouse gases heat up the Earth's atmosphere, allowing it to carry and drop more rainwater than usual.

While the frequency of extreme rainfall has increased by as much as 30 percent in the Southeastern United States, the meteorological phenomena responsible have created repeated catastrophes as floods have ravaged not only Texas, West Virginia and Baltimore, but China and other global regions this year alone. Meanwhile, the Eastern Hemisphere is experiencing record high heat waves and wildfires are burning uncontrollably.

While natural disasters cannot be entirely prevented, the toll they take on human life and property is a direct reflection of the social and political crisis. The dismantling of public infrastructure and the massive poverty that ravages much of the globe have a direct impact on the number of lives lost and homes destroyed by extreme weather. The profit system and the irrational society it creates cannot adequately protect the poor and working-class citizens who are hurt the most by these events.

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