

Obama offers pittance to flood victims in Louisiana

David Brown
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President Obama made a perfunctory visit to flooded areas in Louisiana Tuesday, after facing sharp criticism for refusing to cut short his two-week vacation in Martha's Vineyard to respond to the worst natural disaster in the US since Hurricane Sandy in 2012. In public comments, which together with questions lasted merely 13 minutes, the president praised the miserly federal response and suggested that flood victims should chiefly rely on private donations because "volunteer help actually helps the state because it can offset some of its costs."

The flooding, which began in earnest on August 12, killed 13 people and resulted in the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) declaring 20 parishes (counties) natural disaster areas. The amount of rain unleashed by this unnamed storm was immense. Over 7.1 trillion gallons of water, more than three times that dropped by Hurricane Katrina, fell in the course of a week. Some areas received over two feet of rain within just a few days.

The impacts are far reaching. Within the Baton Rouge area an estimated 146,000 homes have been damaged. At least a quarter of the state's students saw the start of school delayed as districts shut down and many school facilities were flooded. Since floodwaters carry sewage, chemicals and heavy metals, crops exposed to the flood waters are considered unfit for human consumption. The agricultural impact of the flood is at least \$110 million, according to the Louisiana State University AgCenter.

Most private insurers do not cover flood damage and many working class families cannot afford the flood insurance underwritten by FEMA. Only 42 percent of homes in high-risk areas of the state have flood insurance, according to FEMA, while 12.5 percent of homeowners in low and moderate-risk zones are

covered. Many of the areas hit by flooding, including Baton Rouge and Lafayette, were not considered high-risk.

The full economic impact statewide is still unknown, but the FEMA response fails to address the immediate needs of those affected. So far over 100,000 people have filed for federal assistance and have received a total of \$127 million, averaging a little less than \$1,300 per application. According to the *Wall Street Journal* FEMA is currently paying for just 700 families to stay in hotels and motels while they find housing. The maximum FEMA award for a family that has just lost its home and personal possessions is just \$33,000.

In a callous decision reminiscent of President Bush during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Obama remained on vacation in the Massachusetts resort town, playing golf with the rich and famous, until this past Sunday. In the aftermath of Katrina, Bush was roundly criticized for his indifference to the crisis. Then as now, federal aid remained wholly inadequate and masses of poor people were left to effectively fend for themselves. After Katrina, those applying for assistance got an average of just over \$7,000 from FEMA.

In his remarks Obama cited favorably the current condition of New Orleans as proof of the resilience of the state, saying, "I know that you will rebuild again." In the eleven years since Katrina, however, the people of New Orleans have not recovered. The population of the city sits around 60,000 below its pre-Katrina level of 455,000. Public assets were privatized under the guise of "rebuilding," and the public school system was dismantled and replaced with charter schools.

Obama's remarks in Baton Rouge recall his similarly indifferent comments in Flint, Michigan whose residents have been poisoned with lead. After thousands of small children were exposed to the toxic

chemical Obama insisted there was nothing to worry about. Unwilling and unable to outline an effective federal response or propose an infrastructure program to prevent the next disaster, Obama told Flint residents to rely on charities and philanthropists.

In comparison to the mere \$127 million that FEMA has found so far for Louisiana, Obama and the rest of the political establishment can find unlimited amounts of money to bail out banks and drop bombs. In the current presidential race, Hillary Clinton's campaign has already spent \$256 million, more than double the FEMA flood relief. While Obama was not interested in cutting his vacation short for the flooding, he did find time to host a fund-raising dinner for Clinton on August 15, with 60 people paying between \$10,000 and \$33,400 apiece.

FEMA relief so far would only amount to less than 0.02 percent of the 2017 US military budget. It would not even cover eight of the Reaper drones used in Obama's assassination program. The military has budgeted \$4.61 billion on drones over the coming year.

Obama's enthusiasm for the military and indifference to social crises in America is no accident. His political program of wars abroad and austerity at home demands it.



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