

Death toll rises to 18 as floods and tornadoes devastate impoverished US South

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2 May 2017

Over the weekend, a series of tornadoes and floods struck in the Southern and Midwestern regions of the United States, leaving at least 18 dead and dozens more injured.

The body of four-year-old Damien Wiggins, who went missing over the weekend with his 18-month-old little sister, was found in Madison County, Missouri yesterday afternoon. A two-year-old, Melanie Espinoza Rodriguez, was killed in Tennessee after a soccer goal lifted by heavy winds struck her. A seven-year-old in Mississippi was killed by a storm-related electric shock. Volunteer Fire Chief Doug Deckard was killed Sunday morning while investigating storm damage in Cleburne County, Arkansas.

Thousands have been evacuated in recent days and thousands more are without power. Numerous water rescues have been reported Sunday across Little Rock, Arkansas as well. In Texas, according to ETMC Regional Health Care Systems spokeswoman Rebecca Berkley, 56 people were treated at three hospitals and six remained hospitalized Sunday morning, two of them in critical condition.

That storms could wreak such havoc on broad sections of the United States exposes the catastrophic divide separating rich and poor in the world's richest country. Though the number of dead far exceeds those killed in nearly every "terrorist event" in the last 15 years, the storm deaths have been relegated to a back-page story by the country's leading newspapers. As of Monday night, the *New York Times* has no reference to the storms on its web site's front page. The country's wealthiest people do not tend to live in these regions. When they do, they can afford to build personal storm shelters or have the resources to travel out of town to escape the storm's force.

These storms, and the resulting preventable deaths,

highlight the impaired nature of disaster relief and infrastructure in the impoverished regions affected. The storms' impact is ignored by the press because these are poor regions of the country long ignored by politicians from the Democratic and Republican parties.

Disaster relief in these weather-prone regions of the country faces new budget cuts by the Trump administration and state governments. Existing cuts to disaster programs and a near-total lack of social planning has left the regions vulnerable to floods and tornadoes.

In Texas, budget writers have allocated nearly \$50 million less in revenue for emergency disaster relief funds than the previous budgetary cycle. According to the *Texas Tribune*, the funding for the Disaster and Deficiency Grants program fell from \$63.3 million in the previous biennium to \$14.8 million in the current budget cycle.

The Disaster and Deficiency Grants program is responsible for funding emergency service districts and programs that provide services such as emergency transportation, post-storm debris removal, and other forms of specific disaster related needs and services.

This decrease in funding is due to increases in funding for border patrol. In 2015, Texas legislators approved \$800 million in funding for policing the 1,200-mile border shared with Mexico. This increase in funding is for more personnel and equipment on the border, aimed at terrorizing immigrants and paving the way for mass deportation. In other words, the government prioritizes its anti-immigrant crackdown over ensuring that residents of Texas are able to receive proper services when disaster strikes. This fact reveals the bankruptcy of the attempts by the ruling class to pit poor and working class citizens against immigrants.

Residents of East Texas, a region hit by multiple

tornadoes, were unprepared to deal with the storms. Many people in the areas hit—including Henderson, Hopkins, Rains and Van Zandt Counties—live in mobile trailer homes and are afflicted by poverty. Henderson and Van Zandt County, those hit worst by the tornadoes, have respective per capita incomes of \$22,613 and \$23,257. The median household income in Henderson County is \$41,607 and \$44,002 in Van Zandt County.

So far, the primary sources of relief have come from those in local communities such as church and firefighter volunteers.

The problem that Texas and other states—regions familiar with natural disasters such as heavy rain, tornadoes and hurricanes—are vastly unprepared to deal with catastrophe is only exasperated by the attempts of the Trump administration to cut funding of programs such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The Trump administration has proposed an 11 percent cut in funding for FEMA, the federal agency responsible for providing disaster relief beyond what local and state governments can provide. The administration has also proposed a \$6.2 billion cut from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, responsible for providing funding for the Community Development Block Program—a program providing funds for those whose homes are destroyed by natural disasters.

It remains to be seen how the new deal worked out by Congress will impact disaster planning and emergency relief. One thing is certain: the new budget, passed with bi-partisan support, funnels billions of dollars to the military and toward border security.



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