

Houston residents speak out on historic flooding from Hurricane Harvey

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Stories of devastation along the Gulf Coast continue to emerge three days after Hurricane Harvey made landfall near Rockport, Texas.

Perhaps the most glaring and harrowing example is an image that has gone viral on Twitter showing a number of elderly women sitting helplessly in water inside a nursing home in Dickinson, Texas. It was not until the image spread across the Internet that any rescue efforts were made.

Incidents such as these have been common throughout the flooded areas in and around the city of Houston, large swathes of which have been submerged in up to ten feet of water. Individuals have turned to social media to reach out to relatives, friends, neighbors and relief organizations capable of helping them escape the rising waters.

Fouad Hijazi, an immigrant from Lebanon, told the WSWs of the great efforts working people have taken to help their neighbors.

“You can hear rescue helicopters not too far from here, but if you walk to Stella Link you can see people in their own motorboats, big trucks and kayaks trying to reach others. I saw James [a neighbor] wearing a life vest and rope going to help out.”

Regular transportation into and out of the city has been virtually shut down as parts of Interstate 610 are completely underwater.

Fouad said, “Over here we didn’t get water in the house, but the streets were still flooded. The closer you get to Braes bayou, the worse it gets. No one can really get around because there’s water everywhere.”

Local rescue efforts have been limited by available resources. President Donald Trump pledged rapid action from Congress, stating that recovery from the disaster will be “a long and difficult road,” but not all residents are convinced that the federal response will

come as promised.

Sejeia Freelon, a resident of Spring, Texas, just north of Houston, told the WSWs that she expected that the state and federal government response would be “half-assed.” She continued, “The response to the flooding will only be so much. They’ll drain the city, but beyond that is questionable. Rebuilding efforts will be slow and any funding that is actually allocated for disaster relief will go to the more affluent areas.”

When asked about the impact of the storm along class lines, she stated, “Yeah, the storm hit everyone because it’s a natural disaster, it doesn’t discriminate. But the response and how people are affected will depend on class.”

Houston, nicknamed “Bayou City,” has over 2,500 miles of waterways, many of them built to deal with the city being prone to flooding. However, there is little other infrastructure to deal with regular flooding, and not all the waterways serve their intended function.

Ronald Harrell, a retired truck driver, lives in a neighborhood with a bayou that is blocked off by a major freeway. He told the WSWs, “Ever since the city built the beltway, it always floods here.” The neighborhood, which borders Beltway 8, has experienced severe flooding in every major storm since the waterway was blocked off. The residents sued the city after the first incident of flooding but have not been successful in their efforts since then.

When asked about the emergency preparedness of the city, Harrell responded, “I don’t think there’s much we could do. There’s six million people here and only three ways out. Hats off to Mayor Sylvester Turner for not calling a mandatory evacuation of the city.”

Despite repeated flooding, emergency response and evacuation planning in the region is criminally inadequate.

Many residents remember the disaster caused by the mandatory evacuation called in advance of Hurricane Rita in 2005, in which traffic jammed for 100 miles in the midst of a brutal heat wave. Gas stations along the evacuation routes ran out of fuel supplies, as an estimated 3.7 million people fled the Texas coastline. Ninety people lost their lives during the chaotic flight from the city.

Meteorologists say that Harvey has brought the worst flooding Houston has ever seen. With parts of the city's highways, the only major routes out of the city, having been quickly submerged, one can imagine hundreds of people may have drowned if an unplanned mandatory evacuation had been called.

That, however, does not mean that a planned and timely evacuation, mapped out and prepared in advance, could not have made a major difference in reducing the human impact of the storm.



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