

Government negligence exacerbates Hurricane Harvey damage in Houston, Texas

Charles Abelard in Houston, Jerry White
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The residents of Houston, Texas are battling record rainfall and rising floodwaters from Hurricane Harvey, now a tropical storm. The region is bracing for a second landfall, expected on Wednesday morning.

The storm is responsible for at least nine deaths and billions of dollars in damage in Houston, the nation's fourth largest city. Houston and other areas in Texas are already drowning under 30 to 40 inches of rain. Up to 20 inches of new rainfall is expected by Thursday, and the storm is set to break rainfall and flooding records by substantial amounts.

The emergency shelters hastily established by authorities in Houston are overflowing with at least 30,000 residents. The number of fatalities and injuries will likely increase over the next few days, as fast-moving water, fouled with sewage, chemicals and debris, prevents rescuers from reaching flooded areas and helping residents, particularly the poor, sick and elderly, escape to safety.

Even after the tropical storm system moves to the east, the city's rivers, creeks and bayous will continue to flood into Houston's neighborhoods for weeks to come. Waterways are not expected to crest for another three to four days.

Seeking to avoid the political disaster President George W. Bush suffered during Hurricane Katrina, President Donald Trump is traveling to the region today. In a press conference Monday, he made perfunctory remarks about the flooding and assured residents that there would be adequate federal funding to rebuild the city.

Trump dodged questions about the impact of his proposed cuts to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) on rescue efforts, as well as questions about his threat to shut down the federal government if Congress does not provide funding for his proposed

wall along the Mexican border.

A little more than a week before Hurricane Harvey hit Texas, Trump signed an executive order revoking a set of regulations to make federally-funded infrastructure projects less vulnerable to flooding and sea level rises due to climate change. As the hurricane bore down on Houston—the home of the largest number of undocumented immigrants in the country—Trump pardoned the fascistic Arizona sheriff, Joe Arpaio, who was convicted of racially profiling and illegally detaining motorists.

The San Jacinto River, which divides Harris and Montgomery counties, is flowing over its banks and creating serious flooding in northern suburbs. Two reservoirs, Addicks and Barker, which are normally dry and used for pastureland, are so full that officials from the Army Corps of Engineers ordered a controlled release of water to ease pressure on dams and prevent a breach.

The release of water into the Buffalo Bayou will cause flooding in neighborhoods along its banks. While multi-million-dollar homes in the affluent community of Memorial are protected by 30 to 40 foot riverbanks, the working class neighborhoods in the flat and low-lying areas, east of the downtown area and along the industrialized Houston Shipping Channel, are expected to suffer increased flood damage.

The chief victims of the flooding are the poor and working class. One pregnant woman, who works two jobs, told Click2Houston.com that she had lost a car she had just bought and that her apartment had been flooded. Houston is the home of 100,000 refugees from Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

While wide swaths of the city are working class and poor, only New York City is home to more Fortune 500 corporations than Houston. Houston's corporate giants

include ConocoPhillips, Halliburton, Marathon Oil and other energy and oil industry conglomerates. The city was formerly the headquarters of Enron.

Former president George H.W. Bush and his wife issued a statement saluting the “flotilla of volunteers—Points of Light all—who are answering the call to help their neighbors” and the “local elected officials for their grit and determination in the face of this extraordinary storm.”

In contrast to the corporate-controlled politicians, working class residents of all races and nationalities have demonstrated enormous self-sacrifice and social solidarity. They have used fishing boats, inflated rafts and even inflated mattresses to rescue neighbors and strangers.

Although the city is prone to flooding, and recently passed through damaging floods during the “Tax Day Flood” on April 15, 2016 and the “Memorial Day Flood” in 2015, the official response has been haphazard and chaotic.

And while there were advance warnings of the approaching storm, Mayor Sylvester Turner, a Democrat, did not issue a mandatory evacuation order, citing the dangers of a hurried, “unplanned” evacuation. This was a reference to the disaster following Hurricane Rita in 2005, when area freeways quickly clogged and thousands were trapped in their cars for 18 hours or more. Commuters ran out of gas and water and many elderly evacuees perished. Nearly 100 people died.

The previous disaster produced by an unplanned evacuation has been used by local officials to justify no evacuation at all, leaving tens of thousands at the mercy of unprecedented flooding.



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