

Death toll expected to rise as chemical explosions add to devastation caused by Hurricane Harvey

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The number of dead and the devastation wrought by Hurricane Harvey continue to mount in what is already one of the worst disasters in American history.

The confirmed death toll from the region surrounding Houston, Texas remains at 31, but this is expected to rise rapidly as search-and-rescue teams carry out house-to-house searches now that floodwaters are beginning to subside. Meanwhile, now-Tropical Depression Harvey is making its way up through the Southeast, dumping heavy rains on Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee.

At a White House press conference Thursday, Tom Bossert, President Trump's Homeland Security Advisor, reported that an estimated 100,000 homes have been affected by the storm. AccuWeather, a private weather forecasting company, predicts that total damages from the storm could reach \$190 billion, or more than 1 percent of US Gross Domestic Product.

Adding to the danger, two explosions Thursday rocked the Arkema chemical plant in Crosby, Texas, approximately 20 miles northeast of Houston, sparking a fire and sending noxious black smoke into the air. A 1.5-mile radius around the plant was evacuated, and 21 emergency responders were treated for chemical exposure at a local hospital and discharged.

Company officials had warned earlier in the week that the facility, which produces highly volatile organic peroxides, was primed for an explosion after it was inundated by floodwaters and the refrigeration units necessary to keep the chemicals from exploding lost power. More explosions are expected at the plant, and it is not known how many other such facilities in the region are at risk.

Arkema and many other chemical companies opposed

additional safety regulations issued by the Obama administration in the wake of several accidents in Texas, including an explosion at a fertilizer plant in the town of West, near Waco, in 2013 that killed 15 workers. The Trump administration postponed enforcement of the regulations in June.

Further east, more than 120,000 people in the city of Beaumont, Texas, home to some of the country's largest oil refineries, were left without access to clean water after the city's main water pump was overwhelmed by flood waters Wednesday night. The city's hospital, Baptist Hospitals of Southeast Texas, was forced to close and transfer patients to other facilities across the region.

In Tyler County, north of Beaumont, the Army Corp of Engineers was forced to open the floodgates of the Angelina-Neches Dam Wednesday, as rising waters threatened to overflow barriers. All residents were told to leave the region immediately.

"Anyone who chooses to not heed this directive cannot expect to be rescued and should write their social security numbers in permanent marker on their arm so their bodies can be identified," Tyler County Emergency Management warned on Facebook. "The loss of life and property is certain." The post ended with the declaration: "GET OUT OR DIE!"

Officials at every level of government continue to congratulate themselves on their response to the storm, while the endless media commentary avoids any discussion of those responsible for the disaster. If such a calamity had happened in Russia, China or Iran it would undoubtedly be cited as evidence of government incompetence and the failures of officials and urban planners.

US Vice President Mike Pence, fresh from a trip to West Virginia, where he pushed the Trump administration's plans for a massive tax handout to the rich, visited Corpus Christi, Texas on Thursday. Pence echoed the empty pledges of other government officials that Washington will assist in ensuring a full recovery.

At a press conference, Pence repeatedly sidestepped questions about whether the White House would insist on budget cuts to offset any emergency federal funding—a position that Pence took as a congressman in 2005 in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

The vast majority of Houston-area residents who lack flood insurance will be eligible for only \$33,000 in loans from the government to cover building costs and hotel stays. (See, "More than 80 percent of homeowners impacted by Harvey lack flood insurance")

White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders announced at a press conference Thursday that President Donald Trump had decided to donate \$1 million of his own money to relief efforts, pocket change for the billionaire real estate developer.

Trump's PR stunt will be viewed with contempt by the broader population, who have seen tens of thousands left homeless due to negligence by the government and large corporations, including the developers who paved over Houston's wetlands and prairie lands.

Throughout the week, government officials have promoted volunteerism as the way to confront the flooding that has swept over southeastern Texas. The inept rescue effort by the Coast Guard and other government agencies has been buttressed by the response of thousands of volunteers who have risked their own lives to save people trapped by the floodwater.

The destruction wrought by Hurricane Harvey has exposed the reality of social life in the United States, the richest country in the world. Decades of increasing social inequality, official neglect and the decay of social infrastructure have left the fourth-largest city in the country, Houston, completely vulnerable to the hurricane.

The drowning of Houston comes exactly 12 years after Hurricane Katrina devastated nearby New Orleans and the surrounding area, killing more than 1,800 people. It comes seven years after the BP oil disaster in

the Gulf of Mexico, which killed eleven and produced the worst environmental disaster in the history of the country.

Each of these disasters, in different ways, was the product of criminal negligence on the part of the American financial oligarchy. Trillions of dollars have been made available to bail out Wall Street and finance US military operations abroad, yet nothing has been done to prepare for entirely predictable extreme weather events like Harvey and Katrina. In the case of the BP oil spill, corporate cost cutting and deregulation left the entire region to the mercy of the profit drive of a giant oil company.



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