

Hurricane Harvey to be costliest US natural disaster

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With estimates of the total damage ranging from \$180 billion on up, Hurricane Harvey may be the costliest disaster, in terms of economic damage, in US history.

Damage estimates are still preliminary, with large areas still inaccessible. The death toll stands at 50, but it is expected to rise considerably as homes in lower-elevation neighborhoods of Houston—mostly poor and working-class—and in the swamped cities of Beaumont and Port Arthur are reached by rescue and recovery teams.

The American Red Cross reported Sunday its highest total for storm refugees, 37,000 in emergency shelters across the Texas Gulf Coast and 2,000 more in Louisiana. Some 85,000 homes are still without electrical power, mainly in the southeast Texas region between Corpus Christi and Galveston, where Harvey first came ashore as a Category 3 hurricane.

The Texas Department of Public Safety raised its estimate of the total number of homes damaged by flooding and wind to over 200,000 Sunday, with much of Houston and all of Beaumont and Port Arthur still unaccounted for. Nearly 15,000 homes were classified as destroyed.

A staggering one million vehicles were destroyed or damaged, mainly by flooding, which destroys the complex electronic workings of most modern cars and trucks.

Only a small fraction of homeowners and businesses in Harris County, which includes Houston, have federal flood insurance policies, about 250,000 for 1.7 million homes or apartments and 100,000 business premises. For the region as a whole, it is estimated that at least 70 percent of the flood damage is uninsured.

The Houston Independent School District, seventh largest in the US, reported that at least 202 of its 284 schools had water inside, and only 115 had been deemed safe to reopen by September 11, when the school year is now scheduled to start. At least 75 schools had “major” or

“extensive” damage, and 39 were still inaccessible due to flooding and had not been checked.

The damage from Harvey is likely to be more than the combined total of Hurricane Katrina (\$110 billion) and Superstorm Sandy (\$60 billion).

In the face of this catastrophe, the response from the institutions of the American ruling class is a combination of criminal negligence and indifference. The federal and state governments have left the bulk of the population to shift for itself, local governments across the region have virtually collapsed, and the giant corporations and other institutions of the ruling elite—universities, churches, foundations, etc.—have offered only token assistance.

President Trump traveled to the Gulf Coast for the second time in a week, in a choreographed show of “sympathy” for the victims of Harvey in Houston and Lake Charles, Louisiana. As usual with Trump, every appearance was a display of sickening self-love and hollow and obviously phony populism.

After speaking with a small, vetted group of storm refugees at the NRG Center, one of several convention centers in downtown Houston housing victims of Harvey, Trump told reporters, “They’re really happy with what’s going on.” He added, referring to the government response to Harvey, “It’s something that’s been very well received. Even by you guys, it’s been very well received.”

This comment, a mixture of self-promotion and self-delusion, only underscores the unbridgeable social gulf between the billionaire president (along with the media) and the vast majority of the storm’s victims, working people who have lost nearly everything, and in some cases saw loved ones swept away by rushing waters.

The White House is requesting an initial \$7.8 billion appropriation from Congress in emergency assistance to the storm-ravaged area, with a second request for \$6.7 billion to follow shortly. The combined total, \$14.5

billion, is less than 10 percent of the published estimates of damage, and less than a quarter of the recovery and relief funds approved after Superstorm Sandy in 2012-2013.

The Trump administration appears to be seizing on Hurricane Harvey to solve an immediate political dispute with Congress, following the cynical maxim of Obama chief of staff Rahm Emanuel (now mayor of Chicago) to “never let a good crisis go to waste.”

White House budget director Mick Mulvaney, in a letter to House Speaker Paul Ryan sent Friday, called for the initial emergency funds for Hurricane Harvey to be packaged in a bill to raise the federal debt ceiling, which Treasury officials have said must be enacted by September 29 to avoid dislocating Wall Street and global financial markets.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin appeared on Fox News Sunday to reiterate this demand, which is aimed mainly at the Freedom Caucus, a grouping of 40 ultra-right Republicans in the House of Representatives who have threatened to block any increase in the debt ceiling unless it is combined with major cuts in social spending.

Besides the impact on Wall Street, the Trump administration is concerned that a federal debt default could disrupt the overseas operations of the US military, which are dependent on foreign countries receiving US payment for supplies, refueling and other costs, as well as direct financial subsidies to client regimes in Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia.

The real attitude of the Trump administration towards the victims of natural disasters like Harvey is shown in the draft budget plan prepared by the White House, which cut nearly a billion dollars from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, as well as abolishing the Chemical Safety Board, which investigates disasters like the series of explosions at the Arkema plant in Crosby, Texas, northeast of Houston.

Trump has gloried in his executive actions dismantling what little remains of regulatory restrictions on the operations of the giant oil and chemical companies that dominate the Gulf Coast. According to one tabulation, there are 33 plants in the greater Houston area whose corporate owners have filed formal notices with the federal government that in “worst-case” scenarios, a disaster at the plant would endanger a nearby population of more than one million people. Arkema was only one of the 33.

The Environmental Protection Agency reported Sunday that more than 800 wastewater treatment plants are not

fully operational in the wake of Harvey, while 166 water systems are operating under “boil-water” instructions to their customers. Another 50 have shut down entirely, including the water system for the entire city of Beaumont, with a population of 118,000.

Rather than redoubled monitoring of the dangers of toxic chemical leaks, the EPA was engaged Sunday in a bitter war of words with the Associated Press, after the AP reported that there were 13 toxic waste sites in southeast Texas, managed under the EPA’s “superfund” program, that had been inundated, raising the prospect of dioxin and other toxic chemicals leaking into the floodwaters.

The EPA denounced claims that it had not yet bothered to check on these sites, a full week after Harvey struck the region, claiming the AP “is cherry-picking facts.” However, these facts were unanswerably true, as the AP and other sources documented that 13 of the 41 superfund sites in the region were underwater.

The EPA admitted that it had not been able to physically visit the sites near Houston, because of floodwaters, and was relying on aerial monitoring to “confirm possible damage,” a completely inadequate method of determining whether there were breaches in the containment around any of the sites.

The EPA maintained that it was working with state authorities, but the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality has suspended pollution reporting requirements for the duration of the hurricane disaster, and the TCEQ office in Houston is closed. The Trump administration budget would cut the superfund program by 30 percent.

Once the immediate danger of drowning is past, the main threat from floodwaters is the combination of chemicals and waste products they have accumulated. The federal Department of Health and Human Services reported that it had treated 420 of the 7,500 people housed at the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston, some of them for diarrhea or vomiting following contact with contaminated floodwater.



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