

Thirteen million without power, seven dead after Hurricane Irma wreaks havoc in Florida

Niles Niemuth
12 September 2017

Hurricane Irma was downgraded to a tropical storm Monday as it made its way north to Georgia and South Carolina, leaving in its wake an estimated \$100 billion in damage across the entire state of Florida. As of this writing, seven people have died of storm related injuries in Florida. In the Caribbean, 37 have been killed including 10 deaths in Cuba where the storm made landfall on Friday.

The full impact of the storm was less than had been feared, due to shifts in its trajectory over the weekend. However, the damage is still massive and has further exposed the decrepit state of US infrastructure.

Nearly two-thirds of Florida's population, or approximately 13 million people, were still without power Monday night after Irma's high winds brought down trees and power lines across the state and record storm surge flooding inundated cities up and down Florida's Atlantic and Gulf coasts.

"People need to be prepared for some prolonged and extended outages," Eric Silagy, president and CEO of Florida Power and Light, which provides power to half the state's population, warned on Monday.

Some areas of the state are expected to be without power for weeks, as miles of downed power lines will not only have to be restored, but significant sections of the state's power infrastructure will have to be rebuilt.

"'Restore' may not capture the full sense of where we are," Southern Company CEO and Chairman Thomas Fanning told CNBC. "For the very hard impacted areas, I think you're in a 'rebuild' area. That's a big deal. People need to understand this is going to take perhaps weeks, not days, in some areas."

Fanning, a co-chair of the Electricity Subsector Coordinating Council, which coordinates the utility industry and government response to disasters, reported that in the coming days and weeks as many as 60,000

utility workers will be mobilized from across the United States and Canada in the effort to restore power across the region.

Any amount of time without power will be challenging for most, but especially for the elderly and those with health problems that require medical equipment.

As is the case throughout the United States, most of Florida's power lines are above ground, meaning that significant numbers of people lose power when high winds blow, knocking down trees and branches.

Cuts to utility maintenance crews that remove and trim trees near power lines only increases the power grid's vulnerability. Residents reported that in the days leading up to the storm, crews were working overtime to catch up on a year's worth of work to try and minimize the damage, but as usual it was too little, too late.

Ordinances in Palm Beach, Miami-Dade and Broward Counties require new power lines to be placed underground where they will be protected, but there has been no systematic effort across the state to place existing infrastructure underground, or to strengthen substations and power plants that must remain above ground.

The storm has left thousands across the state without access to clean drinking water. Boil water advisories have been issued for communities across the state, as water treatment and distribution plants either lost power or were inundated by flood waters, resulting in a drop in water pressure that could result in the contamination of drinking water with sewage.

By far the worst damage has been done to the Florida Keys where Irma made landfall as a Category 4 hurricane with maximum sustained winds of 130mph. Boats were thrown onto land, RVs and trailer homes

strewn about and a massive storm surge inundated the low-lying islands, with waves flooding bridges, homes and resorts.

The mayor of Islamorada, Jim Mooney, told Local 10 News that he expected it would take six months before people's lives would be "maybe halfway back to normal."

Monroe County Emergency Management Director Martin Senterfitt described the situation on the islands as a "humanitarian crisis" in a statement Sunday. An indefinite dusk to dawn curfew has been declared by Monroe County Sheriff Rick Ramsay.

Air Force and National Guard units began carrying out a major search and rescue effort Monday, deploying disaster mortuary teams to go door to door on the island seeking out survivors and possible fatalities. Officials estimate that approximately 5,000 of the island chain's 30,000 permanent residents remained during the storm.

Roadblocks were set up by police on Monday to keep residents who had evacuated from returning to check on their homes. Officials said that evacuees would not be allowed back onto the islands until all 42 bridges connecting the island chain were inspected and declared safe.

A *Miami Herald* reporter in Florida City captured video of frustrated evacuees protesting and challenging the police after rumors spread that wealthy Keys residents were able to gain early access to their homes.

"There's got to be one way for everybody, not just the people that got the money and can buy their way in," Warren Stincer, a resident of Key Largo, demanded. "Are people going in there? That's a millionaire! They had money and they got themselves in there. It's got to be the same way for all of us! For all of us!"

Major flooding from tropical rains and storms hit all along the southeast Atlantic Coast Monday as far north as Charleston, South Carolina.

Record flooding hit Jacksonville in northeastern Florida where rain and storm surges pushed water levels on the St. Johns River past the previous high in 1864. The city's downtown business district along the river was completely flooded, dozens of people had to be rescued from the rising waters, and city officials advised residents to hang white towels from their windows if they needed assistance.

Marco Island off Florida's southwest coast, where

Irma made its second landfall in the state, was left without clean water and electricity. More than a dozen homes had their roofs torn off by high winds. Miami Beach on the southeast coast is set to reopen to residents and tourists today after Irma brought record storm surge flooding to the Miami area on Sunday.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact