

Inhabitants of Irma-ravaged Saint Martin gain nothing from French President Macron's visit

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When on Wednesday French President Emmanuel Macron finished his trip to Saint Martin in the Caribbean, an island territory that was 95 percent destroyed by Hurricane Irma, its inhabitants were still fighting for survival. Distribution of food and water remain completely chaotic and inadequate, there is a rising danger of epidemics, and thousands of people, many of them in a weakened state, are homeless, without food or medical care.

Officially, the hurricane claimed 11 lives, almost one third of the losses Irma caused in the Caribbean, as well as seven missing. The French government has not yet decided to give an official estimate of the number of wounded. The damage is initially estimated at €1.2 billion.

Macron was compelled to travel to the devastated island by a rising drumbeat of criticism from the political establishment, on the one hand, criticising the “failure of the state,” and from the French public, which was appalled by the official lack of preparation and indifference to the island's inhabitants, even after it was clear that the most powerful hurricane in history was set to hit the island.

A crisis meeting was held at the Elysée presidential palace on September 9, even though the scope of the disaster had been obvious for two days, and just after Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front (FN) attacked the “completely insufficient means for law enforcement” in Saint Martin. Macron then announced on Twitter the “doubling of military and police forces” on the island.

Once he was on the island, Macron was confronted by the rising hostility of inhabitants who for days were left to fend for themselves without food, water, or

medical care, as running water and electricity services collapsed. No evacuation order had been given before the storm, and the evacuation after the storm was very partial, while private residents of nearby Guadeloupe came by boat to help the inhabitants. Security forces sent to the island primarily guarded aid shipments that had been sent but not distributed.

Elie Domota, a trade union official in Guadeloupe, said on BFMTV: “The government mainly sent 2,000 soldiers and various police special forces units, as if we were in some sort of outlaw state.” He accused the government of “colonial-style management of this catastrophe.” He added that the first initiative of the state was to “evacuate the wives of soldiers and policemen, leaving the poorest people in chaos.”

Macron travelled to Saint Martin with three ministers in what was primarily a political manoeuvre to quiet criticisms from the conservative The Republicans (LR), the FN, or Jean-Luc Mélenchon. It also was aimed at rising discontent among workers in the Caribbean and in France, who are drawing devastating political conclusions about Macron's government at the same time as it imposes its anti-democratic decrees for the destruction of the Labour Code.

Macron presented himself in the island as a head of state who was “rolling up his sleeves,” anxious to help his fellow citizens, in a series of carefully staged photo-ops designed primarily to appeal politically to the security forces. One of his main priorities was to participate in a police patrol on Tuesday evening and to call for the “disarmament” of the island.

Allegations of systematic ransacking immediately after the hurricane were rapidly picked up by French politicians, who tried to give the impression that the

island was being taken over by organised looting. This false picture was torn to shreds by reports from the island's inhabitants.

One said: "For four days we've had no water or electricity, no roof, everything is wet, we need to wash a two-month-old baby, it's very hot and he's breaking out in a rash, and look, there is another cyclone [hurricane Jose was threatening the island]. They give you three bottles of water and say, 'stay at home.' What are we supposed to do? Then they complain about looting. They gave me three bottles of water to survive a Category 4 storm, there is the issue of hygiene, my child is two months old, we have to eat, do the dishes and the laundry, flush the toilet. It's not theft, it's survival."

An officer interviewed by the right-wing daily *Le Figaro* said, "We are dealing with people who are in need and have no more resources, now that electricity and running water have been cut off." He said they were taking "action that is often connected to survival strategies to feed their families. In fact, the targeted shops mainly were selling basic foodstuffs and products for essential needs."

Faced with these criticisms, Macron rejected "any idea of abandonment or neglect on the part of my government." He announced that the island would be rebuilt by big business. "I am appealing to all big businesses and we will mobilise them," junior minister Benjamin Griveaux said on France Inter on September 11.

Macron seized upon the proposition for a disaster management inquiry made by LR and supported by Mélenchon, saying he was "favourable" to it, but "at the right time."

Saint Martin is divided between France and the Netherlands, and the French portion is deeply impoverished. Unemployment affects a staggering 27 percent of the population. The percentage of households dependent on relief is high: one-third relies on Universal Medical Coverage (CMU) and nearly a tenth of the population relies on welfare payments. Two thirds of tax households declare yearly incomes less than €9,400.

Infrastructure has been totally neglected for decades, which caused the collapse of running water and electricity services during the hurricane.

In the United States, decades of tax handouts and

other payoffs to the super-rich financed by wave upon wave of cuts to basic infrastructure led to the devastation of Texas and Florida by this year's hurricanes. In France, the systematic transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top by successive governments, both of the right and of the Socialist Party (PS), are now producing similar catastrophes.

This is precisely the class character of the policies being rammed through the parliament by the Macron government. Its indifference, faced with the distress of populations devastated by Hurricane Irma, is of a piece with the massive handouts to the financial oligarchy entailed by Macron's cuts to the tax rate on the top income brackets and on corporations.



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