Death toll in Southern California mudslides rises to 17

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Rescuers continued to search for survivors in the upscale community of Montecito, California Wednesday after rivers of mud and debris had raged through the area a day earlier.

As of this writing, 17 people have died as a result of the mudslides. Names of the victims have not yet been released pending notification of family members, however anecdotal evidence suggests a wide disparity in ages among the victims, meaning that physical strength and health were not factors in surviving the mudslides.

The *Los Angeles Times* published pictures of a 60-year-old man carried away in a body bag. Area resident Maude Feil reported that she found the body of a young woman pinned beneath railroad tracks Wednesday morning. Feil was reportedly horrified after realizing that the figure she was looking at wasn't a mannequin but an actual person.

Twenty-eight others had been reported injured and 17 more are reported missing after more than five inches of rain fell in the region on Tuesday. Rescuers described picking up survivors covered in mud. One toddler's mouth was filled with dirt and he was likely minutes away from death when they found him.

Much of the area remains inaccessible and officials worry that the number of people killed will rise as the effort begins to transition from rescue to recovery.

Anticipating a rising death toll, the Santa Barbara Coroner's office has received assistance from the Los Angeles Coroner's Office in identifying and processing bodies.

The mudslides are the direct result of unseasonably intense rainfall and the Thomas Fire, which burned through the area a few weeks prior and continues to burn northeast of the area. The Thomas Fire began on December 4, 2017 and grew to become the largest wildfire by area in the state's history.

The fire turned thousands of acres of land into a charred, desolate lunarscape. Hundreds of square miles near Montecito and the adjoining city of Santa Barbara were stripped of vegetation where rainfall could no longer be adequately absorbed. Tuesday's flash floods dislodged truck-sized boulders, which mangled steel car frames and were strong enough to lift entire homes off of their foundations.

Thus far, about 100 homes have been recorded as destroyed and 300 have been damaged. Eight commercial properties have also been destroyed. Thick mud and downed power lines filled the streets including in front of storefronts and commercial office buildings.

Santa Barbara County Sheriff Bill Brown described the mud and debris strewn area as a "World War I battlefield." Brown described a "carpet of mud and debris everywhere."

Santa Barbara County Fire Department Spokesman Mike Eliason was even more explicit. "A majority of Montecito and that whole area is in the Stone Age right now. There is no water. There is no gas. There is no electricity." Many utility access points are now buried under several feet of mud and it could be several days and perhaps weeks before they are fully restored.

According to Nick Turner, general manager for the Montecito Water District, the pipeline connecting nearby Lake Cachuma to the Montecito Water District broke in several places resulting in a complete shutdown of water service. Another water main connected to the Jameson Reservoir broke as well. At this time, there is no estimate as to when water service may be resumed. Workers with the water district must first find the locations of the breaks before beginning repairs.

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A boil water advisory has been issued for all area residents while bottled water is being distributed at area shopping centers and fire stations.

A 30-mile section of the 101 Freeway also remains closed as does the 33 Freeway running through Los Padres National Forest. Travelers hoping to pass through the oceanfront region will now have to take a nearly three-hour detour around the national forest and through the Central California Bakersfield region instead. The area around Montecito itself remains inaccessible by road.

Five hundred firefighters assisted in the search for victims along with residents who remained in the area to help locate missing friends and loved ones. Many, however, are barred from assisting in the search due to the establishment of a “public safety exclusion zone” and any unapproved persons in the area could face arrest. The US Coast Guard and National Guard are also involved in the rescue efforts.

This latest natural disaster once again condemns, first and foremost, the profit system which cannot prevent nor effectively recover from another calamity of its own making. The fact that such a disaster is occurring in one of the wealthiest enclaves in the country, home to many of Hollywood’s most powerful and wealthy celebrities, including Oprah Winfrey, Ellen DeGeneres and Tom Cruise, only further underscores the point.

While the Trump administration passes more than a trillion dollars in tax cuts for corporations and the ultra-wealthy, the administration of California’s Democratic Governor Jerry Brown has systematically cut funding for Cal Fire and other local firefighting and prevention services, ensuring that dry brush is never cleared in advance of the devastating California wildfire seasons each year.

Lastly, only a few hundred fire service personnel are mobilized with smaller numbers of aircraft to find scores of people trapped and dying under mud and debris. An organized and effective response to such a calamity remains impossible when ultimately subordinated to the interests of private profit.

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