Death toll in Southern California mudslides rises to 20

Dan Conway
16 January 2018

The death toll in the coastal community of Montecito, California rose to 20 on Monday as rescuers have all but given up hope of finding anyone else alive. To that end, Santa Barbara County Sheriff Bill Brown recently announced that authorities had transitioned Sunday from a “search and rescue phase” to a “search and recovery phase.”

Pinit Sutthithepa, 30, an employee at a Toyota dealership in nearby Santa Barbara, was the latest body found. His six-year-old son Peerawat was found dead a few days earlier while his 2-year-old daughter Lydia is still listed as missing. She is one of 4 residents still listed as missing and rescuers are giving up hope of finding any of them alive.

Seven days after the disaster began, US President Donald Trump has not said a word about the tragedy. Instead, the White house press office released a two-sentence statement of hollow praise for firefighters and sympathy for the victims.

In fact, the president has shown enormous contempt for the largest state in the country by population after it voted against him in the 2016 election. The massive wildfires in Northern California and the Santa Barbara area last fall that resulted in at least 43 deaths did not elicit any timely comments from the reality TV star-turned president even as the hurricanes that hit Southeastern Texas and Florida during the same time period did.

Officials estimate that it will take Montecito, a city of 10,000 residents, at least a decade, if not more, to fully recover from the effects of the disaster. The multimillionaires and billionaires who made the town their playground will move on and purchase mega-mansions and sprawling ranches elsewhere. For the majority of residents—including landscapers and housekeepers who served the ultra-rich—their lives have been irretrievably ruined.

This disaster has revealed, yet again, the deplorable state of US infrastructure, which is utterly incapable of coping with extreme weather events that are now becoming regular occurrences throughout the country and throughout the West Coast in particular.

An entire stretch of one of California’s main highway arteries, the 101 Freeway, still remains closed a week after the incident, leaving travelers with no choice but to undertake an up to five-hour detour around the Santa Ynez Mountain range. CalTrans, the state’s main transportation agency, has announced that the freeway will remain closed indefinitely although some officials are optimistic that the freeway might reopen next week.

However, once finished with vacuuming stagnant water from the freeway surface—up to two feet deep in some areas—CalTrans workers must test the road surface for structural integrity. Lines will also have to be repainted with new guardrails and other structural features reinstalled. It is therefore possible that the freeway may remain closed for several weeks, if not months.

As of Sunday, CalTrans reported that 150 yards of debris were removed from the northbound lane of the freeway while 80 yards were removed from the southbound side. The total length of the closed section, however, is 2 miles or 3,520 yards.

Dump trucks are regularly moving mudslide detritus to the nearby community of Summerland were the waste is sorted. Some of the first oil rigs in the world were built in Summerland in the late 19th century and Summerland was the site of the first offshore oil rig.

A blowout at the nearby Dos Cuadras offshore oil field in 1969 was a formative event for the modern environmental movement while various oil leaks have regularly caused beach closures and other public health

© World Socialist Web Site

emergencies since. The town has now become a dumping ground for the Montecito disaster.

As the water and sewage systems in Montecito are now completely unusable, beaches in the nearby areas of Goleta and Carpinteria are also being used to dump waste. The unloaded mud and sediment are likely responsible for the shutting down of coastlines nearby by Santa Barbara officials over health concerns.

Santa Barbara Emergency Management announced that their survey of structural damages is now 35 percent complete. They have been able to definitively determine that 296 buildings were damaged or destroyed in the mudslide and that number is expected to rise as the structural survey continues.

This weekend more than one thousand people gathered in Montecito in a candlelight vigil for the mudslide victims. Santa Barbara Mayor Cathy Murillo spoke at the vigil. “I don’t know about you, but I’m scared of Mother Nature right now,” she said.

While residents in the area do have a great deal to fear from “mother nature,” the principal cause of their distress is not an inexplicable “act of God,” it is in fact manmade.

The mudslides are the direct result of wildfires, specifically the Thomas Fire, which burned through the area last month. The Thomas Fire became the largest in California’s recorded history. After five years of drought and minimal efforts by the state and federal government to clear fire-prone areas of dead brush and undergrowth, conditions were ripe for the growth of massive wildfires.

In fact, these factors, coupled with an overall rise in temperatures globally have led to 15 of the largest 20 wildfires in California’s recorded history occurring within the past 20 years alone.

The effect of flash flooding on landscapes stripped of vegetation by fires is also well known, yet the area’s 11 debris basins were wholly insufficient to contain last week’s mudslides.

Despite such disasters, California politicians, Democrat and Republican alike, have made it quite clear that no significant assistance will be provided and there will be no meaningful upgrades to infrastructure whatsoever. The Cal Fire state firefighting agency now regularly must tap into its fire prevention funds to actually fight fires. The US Forest Service must also do the same.

The proposed budget proposal for fiscal year 2018-2019 by outgoing Democratic governor Jerry Brown also provides no additional assistance to fight wildfires. This is despite the fact that state tax revenues were up over $6 billion versus the previous tax year. Nonetheless, the governor declared that the state’s primary responsibility was to its creditors, i.e. its wealthy bondholders, and that the majority of the tax surplus would be put into the state’s rainy-day fund, i.e. a mechanism to make permanent cuts to vital social programs including firefighting and prevention.

The gubernatorial candidates for the 2018 election held their first major debate on Sunday. None of those present, four Democrats and two Republicans, had anything to say about the disaster in Montecito.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site