

Death toll from Hurricane Michael reaches 36 as residents struggle to recover

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The official death toll from Hurricane Michael rose to 36 on Thursday. Thousands more residents are struggling to recover and survive. Those who evacuated last week and have been allowed to return home for the first time have arrived to a scene of utter devastation. Mexico Beach, Panama City and other areas hardest hit by the storm have the appearance of a war zone, with nearly every structure reduced to rubble.

An estimated 400,000 people are still without power in Florida. Motorists continue to form lines hundreds of cars long to buy gas for their cars and generators. Cellphone service is still unrestored in much of the impacted area, and freshwater and sewage systems in many areas are not functioning.

Residents left homeless by the hurricane have filled tent cities and makeshift refugee camps. Curfews have been imposed, including from 6:30 p.m. to 6:30 a.m. in Bay County, which includes Panama City, Lynn Haven and Mexico City. Local police have reported arresting dozens of residents desperate for food for “looting” every night. Thousands of National Guard troops have been deployed throughout the area.

Everywhere, the massive volunteer effort in support of the storm’s victims contrasts with the inadequate and repressive response of state and federal authorities.

Authorities have acknowledged that the death toll is likely to climb, as residents currently listed as missing will soon be presumed dead. In addition to those who are buried beneath the debris in the cities, there may be many more in remote, rural areas whom rescuers have not reached. Still others may have been carried out to sea in the storm. Efforts to identify victims have been hampered by the fact that the offices of the county medical examiners were damaged in the storm and are still without power.

Dr. Jay Radke, the medical examiner for Bay

County, told the *New York Times* that most of the deaths in his county thus far were so-called “medical” fatalities, not arising from physical injuries during the storm, but nonetheless caused by it, “perhaps because of missed dialysis or a heart attack connected to yard cleanup.”

Among the ruins of Mexico Beach, one large house remained relatively unscathed and has been the subject of multiple news reports. Built in recent years by a wealthy Tennessee attorney who lives part-time in Florida, the house was constructed with the most modern safety features and is said to be designed to withstand winds of up to 250 miles per hour. That it stands amid hundreds of destroyed homes is a direct illustration of the role social inequality plays in determining who is most impacted.

The hurricane has produced an ongoing ecological catastrophe. In the latest example of its long-term impact, 80,000 gallons of untreated sewage discharged from a wastewater treatment plant compromised by the storm led to a large-scale fish die-off downstream in Apalachicola Bay. Waterways across the panhandle also face pollution from the runoff of industrial and agricultural chemicals during the flooding.

Governor Rick Scott, who is running for the Senate seat held by longtime Democratic Senator Bill Nelson, has exploited the human tragedy caused by the storm for his campaign. In an ad released this week, Scott claims, over footage of staged photo ops of him handing out emergency supplies, that he is personally leading the recovery effort. He claims to be personally housing first responders in his “home”—the governor’s mansion in Tallahassee.

Scott has also managed to overcome the alleged fear of voter fraud that led him to sign 2011 legislation that restricted early voting to reduce turnout among likely

Democratic Party voters. Scott has signed an executive order that allows counties impacted by the hurricane to expand early voting days and locations. Though the roughly 200,000 voters in the affected counties only comprise approximately two percent of the state's electorate, they typically give a large majority to Republican candidates and could decide a close election.

The impact of Hurricane Michael could have been even greater had it landed in a more densely populated area, rather than the relatively sparsely inhabited Panhandle region. Had the storm moved slightly east and made landfall in the Tampa Bay area, home to 3.5 million people, it would have killed at least 2,000 people, according to a study performed eight years ago by the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council on the potential effects of a category five storm. The study projected that nearly half a million homes would be destroyed, along with 10,000 businesses. It also estimated that the storm surge in downtown Tampa would reach up to 26 feet.

The conclusions of the planning council are likely an underestimation, as the population in that area has since grown by another million. The study also projected a five-day window to evacuate residents between hurricane formation and landfall, a longer period than the 73 hours Michael took to develop in the Gulf of Mexico.

Indeed, the speed at which Michael developed from a tropical storm into a major hurricane is an indication that even the worst-case scenarios envisioned by climate scientists are being exceeded by events. Hurricanes are fed by warm ocean waters, and last month was the warmest September in recorded history. The waters in the Gulf of Mexico are said to be two to four degrees warmer this year than average, a phenomenon that is directly attributable to global warming.



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