

Hundreds of thousands still suffering two weeks after winter storm hit southern US

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More than two weeks after sub-freezing temperatures from winter storms devastated the southern US, hundreds of thousands are still without water and many face a long road to recovery.

Residents of Jackson, Mississippi remain under a boil water advisory, and many do not have running water at all. The city has set up multiple sites for distribution of non-potable water just for people to be able to flush their toilets. Some residents reported having to melt snow for the same purpose.

In a press release, city officials reported a total of 80 water mains broke or were damaged over the course of the crisis last month. Officials stated that significant progress was made in repairing Jackson's water supply, but there was no timeline for when a full restoration of services will be complete. Initially, the water system was projected to be fully operational last week.

On top of having to boil water, residents are also being asked to limit their water usage. Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves dispatched the National Guard with tanker trucks of non-potable water on Wednesday.

The cold snap that hit last month exposed the dilapidated state of Jackson's water and sewage system. A city official told CBS that there was no way of knowing how many people were without water, because the system was too old. Jackson has no way of tracking water outages besides residents reporting them. In a press conference, Mayor Chokwe Lumumba lamented that the city has a \$2 billion infrastructure problem but an annual budget of only \$300 million.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality reported over 207,000 Texans were still without water as of Tuesday morning. The majority of those without water live in impoverished rural areas. Many of the communities do not have the resources to fix their water systems and were not approved for federal aid by

the Biden administration, which allotted disaster relief for less than half of Texas' counties.

Texas residents are still struggling to get enough food and water, as millions of workers lost working hours in the days after the initial freeze. Some missed an entire week or more of work, a loss of more than a quarter of their monthly income. For workers already on a knife's edge, living paycheck to paycheck, the storm proved a complete disaster.

Many are being forced to choose between buying groceries or paying for their rent. Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner reported about 10,000 people visited a single distribution center Sunday for food kits and bottles of water. The Houston Food Bank, which serves communities in 18 counties across Southeast Texas, was forced to enter "disaster mode" because they did not have enough volunteers to meet the surge in demand for food assistance after the storm.

Houston officials lifted a boil water advisory more than a week ago, but thousands still do not have running water because of damaged pipes. Houston's infrastructure was not designed for extreme cold weather and the volume of burst pipes overwhelmed the city's plumbers. The shortage is so severe that Republican Governor Greg Abbott has asked for plumbers in other states to assist with repair efforts.

All signs point to the winter storm eclipsing Hurricane Harvey, which hit the state four years ago, as Texas' worst recent natural disaster, in both financial and human costs. State officials still have not issued an official death tally but reports from multiple cities indicate that it is at least in the hundreds, and likely to grow. For comparison, more than 75 people died in Texas during Hurricane Harvey, including about 50 in the Houston area.

The *Houston Chronicle* counted at least 51 deaths

that authorities attributed to, or suspected were caused by, the storm and cold, and another five believed to be linked. The newspaper named each victim and the cause of death, including hypothermia, carbon monoxide poisoning, and household fires.

On Tuesday, the Dallas County medical examiner's office said it is investigating whether 17 deaths are linked to the winter storm. The agency said it could take two to three months until the causes of death are determined.

Travis County spokesman Hector Nieto told the *Austin American-Statesman* that the medical examiner's office is now processing more than 80 deaths reported in the Austin area since February 13.

A common thread links those who succumbed to the storm: they were among society's most vulnerable. Most of the reported deaths were elderly and a significant number were homeless. In Houston alone, six children died. An 11-year-old boy in Conroe, Texas died in his bed of suspected hypothermia after his family's trailer home was left without power for two days and temperatures fell below freezing.

However, it must be stated that the weather and the damage wrought was not an uncontrollable "act of God," as many politicians have asserted. Rather, the intense human suffering is a direct consequence of the rotten American capitalist system.

Scientists have warned about disruptions in the polar jet stream, spawned by rapid climate change, that could lead to extreme winter storms far into the southern US and northern Mexico. Additionally, the American ruling class possesses the resources required to implement measures to mitigate the impact of inclement weather.

The Texas government has tirelessly worked to cover up the decades-long deregulation conspiracy its politicians have carried out on behalf of energy corporations.

Governor Abbott has shielded the power companies, which reaped tens of billions from the disaster, and devoted his time to pointing fingers and demanding resignations from the leadership of the state's electric grid operator, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, and the Public Utility Commission.

President Joe Biden meanwhile traveled to Houston last week to absolve the criminals in the Texas government of all accountability, instead promising to

work with them "for the long haul." Biden has only given a pittance to the tens of millions impacted, while trillions are made available to inflate the stock market.

After Hurricane Katrina destroyed much of New Orleans and a significant portion of the Gulf Coast in 2005, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote:

"Hurricane Katrina has laid bare the awful truths of contemporary America—a country torn by the most intense class divisions, ruled by a corrupt plutocracy that possesses no sense either of social reality or public responsibility, in which millions of its citizens are deemed expendable and cannot depend on any social safety net or public assistance if disaster, in whatever form, strikes."

The disaster which is still unfolding from Texas to Mississippi is the most recent affirmation of this analysis.



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