Biden visits storm-struck Louisiana as Hurricane Ida death toll continues to rise

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"My message to everyone affected is: 'We're all in this together,'" President Joe Biden told reporters, repeating his trademark banality as he landed Friday in New Orleans, Louisiana, to survey the damage and destruction from Hurricane Ida. Approximately one million people in the city of New Orleans and surrounding towns have been without power since Ida made landfall Sunday as a Category 4 storm and another 600,000 are without water.

The storm is the fourth most powerful to make landfall in US history and has caused deadly flooding and tornadoes as far as New Jersey and New York, where at least 42 people were killed as water overtook cars and rushed into basement apartments. Louisiana's death toll from the storm currently stands at 12 but is expected to rise further.

With no power and no gasoline to refuel generators, many residents in New Orleans and across southern Louisiana have had to suffer under sweltering heat conditions as the heat index in the region rose to 100 degrees Fahrenheit. With water service also knocked out, the pumps are unable to filter water, creating potentially toxic conditions in the water that is left.

Biden's visit came a day after news broke that four nursing home residents had died this week in a massive warehouse shelter in Tangipahoa Parish that had been packed with over 800 people.

Residents from seven different nursing homes across Tangipahoa, Orleans, Terrebonne, and Lafourche parishes had been crammed into the leaky warehouse last Friday, ahead of Ida's landfall, by Baton Rouge nursing home owner Bob Dean. Senior citizens were reportedly forced to sleep on cots piled on the floor with virtually no privacy available for sensitive care. The infirm were reportedly sitting in their own filth as temperatures rose and emergency services were stifled across the region. In addition to the four known deaths, at least a dozen people were hospitalized in need of medical attention following rescue efforts on Wednesday and Thursday after the storm.

The warehouse in the town of Independence was blocked off Friday by Louisiana State Police and the Louisiana Department of Health. Crime scene tape was placed around the building and the remaining residents had been taken to nearby facilities in Baton Rouge and surrounding towns.

The local coroner's office has not released an official cause of death for the four victims but did say that three of the deaths were related to the storm.

It is unclear at this time if extreme heat contributed to the deaths at the makeshift shelter; however, local officials are reviewing what legal actions could be taken against Dean as the owner of the nursing homes.

"We're going to do a full investigation into whether the owner of the facilities failed to keep residents safe and whether he intentionally obstructed efforts to check in on them and determine what conditions were in the shelter," Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards said during a news conference Thursday.

One anonymous worker at the facility told WWL-TV he was afraid there would be some deaths when he saw the conditions at the shelter, "I knew that wasn't going to be safe for the residents and for the workers. We did the best we could with what we had." The worker explained, "Just wasn't enough room, living conditions wasn't good. It was too crowded. Didn't have enough people." Inspectors with the Louisiana Department of Health came to look at the facility immediately following the storm but were turned away by nursing home workers before eventually being allowed inside.

For many Louisiana residents still living in the affected areas, it is the post-storm conditions that are

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resulting in hospitalizations and fatalities. Road conditions remain extremely hazardous and thousands of homes are unlivable, forcing residents into crowded and unsanitary living conditions. Three deaths have been attributed to carbon monoxide poisoning, a result of the improper use of fuel generators.

Biden, for his part, was reduced to pleading with insurance companies not to deny payouts to residents facing massive damage to property. Companies are free to refuse claims since city and state officials had announced ahead of the storm that there was no time to issue a mandatory evacuation. According to state insurance regulations, companies are allowed to deny coverage for evacuees if they left during non-mandatory evacuation conditions.

Furthermore, flood insurance is prohibitively expensive for many in the flood-prone areas of the state and therefore water damage to their homes will not be covered, forcing many to leave or face homelessness.

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