

Death toll from Hurricane Ian continues to climb as tens of thousands are left ruined and neglected by state and federal governments

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The death toll from Hurricane Ian after barreling into Florida and the Carolinas has risen to more than 80 amid reports that the number of dead is expected to climb higher in the coming days, serving as an indictment of state and federal officials who refused to safely evacuate residents as Ian bulldozed inland.

As of this writing the death toll stands at 79 in Florida and 4 in North Carolina, as only remnants of the storm remain after traversing up the southeast United States. The cities that bore the most impact from Ian's destructive path, those in southwest Florida's Lee County, have seen deaths rise exponentially. Lee County has confirmed at least 49 deaths total and that more bodies are likely to be found as rescue crews sift through the rubble from destroyed buildings.

The county with the second highest death toll is Charlotte, just north of Lee's Fort Myers. Larger cities in Lee like Fort Myers, Cape Coral and Sanibel Island were inundated by the storm surge through enormous floods and powerful winds, wiping away numerous roadways and buildings. The storm also caused major damage in South Carolina as it washed away four of the state's piers, including two in Myrtle Beach.

More than 1,110 people have been rescued alive in the zone where Hurricane Ian made landfall, including 800 in Lee County alone.

One local official blamed residents for not leaving their homes and going to county-run emergency shelters, pointing out that only 4,000 people had gone to Lee County shelters, compared to 60,000 during Hurricane Irma in 2017.

Lee County Commissioner Kevin Ruane was responding to press reports about the delays in issuing evacuation recommendations because the initial forecasts had placed the storm's likely landfall further north. "Unfortunately, people did get complacent," he claimed.

This is a despicable evasion of responsibility, covering up both the conflicting and shifting recommendations made by state and local officials and the well-founded concern about going into crowded shelters under conditions of an ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the new upsurge in monkeypox.

There is as well as the impact of the years-long attack on science and public health concerns made by the DeSantis

administration. DeSantis has been one of the most strident in opposing any form of public health precautions for the COVID-19 pandemic and denounced many of the local officials responsible for hurricane preparedness for supposedly exaggerating the dangers of COVID-19. This certainly had an effect in slowing popular response to hurricane warnings in the heavily Republican southwest coastal region.

In addition to coastal areas, Ian also swept through inland parts of Florida leaving massive flooding that has kept infrastructure and thousands of homes submerged in water. A 14-mile stretch of Interstate Highway 75 was shut down due to massive river flooding. Beyond the southwest portion of the state, many major cities in the central region are grappling with large-scale flooding, like Orlando and Kissimmee.

Although Ian has officially passed through, water levels had risen significantly Sunday in various parts of Florida's southwest, including in North Port city in Sarasota County. Roadways are currently engulfed in water, reaching as high up as mailboxes, flooding SUVs and trucks, blocking access to major highways and leaving families trapped in their homes. Many residents in North Port's suburbs have also begun to run out of food and water.

Anger across the state is mounting over the failure of DeSantis and state authorities to assist residents in leaving threatened areas in the leadup to the storm's rampage. Nothing was done to prepare millions for what was to become one of the most destructive hurricanes ever to hit Florida and the US. All storm preparedness was left up to individuals and families were forced to fend for themselves, a likely death sentence for many hundreds who were left without any way to evacuate.

The flagrant abandonment of vulnerable residents at the hands of DeSantis, a truly repugnant figure with ambitions to lead the Republican Party's transformation into a fascist party, testifies to the indifference to human life on the part of the corporate political establishment as a whole.

The warnings DeSantis claimed to have issued earlier in the week that certain parts of the Tampa Bay area would face a "direct hit" were not accompanied by any advance preparation. The evacuation notices merely consisted of residents being

advised to seek refuge with family and friends, who for many were not accessible or were themselves severely impacted by the storm.

President Joe Biden joined with the far-right governor in covering up the abysmal preparedness level of local, state and federal government. In a discussion last Tuesday with DeSantis, according to White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, the only effort Biden made in aiding hurricane preparation was “continued close coordination,” without any release of substantial resources to help facilitate evacuations.

Biden had also told reporters last week that his administration was “on alert and in action to help the people of Florida.” This “alert” was not to help ensure the safe evacuation of the population, but to release federal dollars to pay for cleaning up the piles of destroyed buildings and dead bodies left from the crisis.

Evacuation orders took no account of homeowners unable to leave their residences due to the cost, having nowhere to go or fearful of suffering damage to their property without adequate insurance, in particular, flood insurance.

Only 13 percent of Florida residences are covered by flood insurance, which is not offered by private insurers because it is unprofitable, and can only be obtained through the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Only 5 percent of residences in central Florida, away from both coasts, have flood coverage, but much of this region was worse hit by flooding than the coastal areas.

Ian has further exposed a property insurance crisis plaguing the state. Thousands of insurance customers are not expected to receive adequate coverage for the type of damage to personal and commercial property, totaling as much as \$40 billion, according to insurance analyst Artemis.

One Florida resident told NPR that they were unable to leave because they worked as a wildlife rehabilitator and cared for a feral cat colony, but many hurricane evacuation shelters do not accept animals while only a few allow only one to two animals, leaving those with small pet businesses unable to leave their homes. Evacuations proved nearly impossible for those working as first responders and in animal shelters, and for people with disabilities.

Evacuation proved especially challenging for the more than 400,000 Florida households where English is not the primary spoken language. They frequently had difficulty receiving emergency notices and acting on them and understanding the vague and shifting recommendations.

The same holds true for low-income families and individuals who can’t afford to evacuate due to difficulties with paying rent or mortgages. The poor may be forced to wait until the last minute to evacuate, missing out on affordable hotel rooms, or any rooms at all, or they may end up waiting out the storm in their homes at terrible risk.

Ian has once again shed light on the vast class gulf separating the working class from the privileged layers of the upper

middle class and the truly wealthy, those with the means to evacuate before the storm and deal easily with its financial burdens.

For example, in North Port, dozens of mobile homes in a trailer park saw their roofs completely torn apart with roofs whipped away in the surrounding areas and some seeing their entire homes destroyed. Residents in several other trailer parks and working-class communities said they received little to no attention and aid compared to wealthier beach towns despite facing the same deadly combination of wind and rain.

A family from Miami, Cassandra and Keanu, started a GoFundMe page to solicit funds for their relatives in nearby Naples, who “lost everything from the storm surge, hurricane winds, and massive flooding.” Cassandra noted how her brother-in-law had to swim through the storm-flooded waters to rescue their mother Karen, who nearly drowned. Like the circumstances of millions of families impacted by Ian, they did not have renters insurance and had no funds to replace their cars, homes and possessions which had been destroyed by the storm.

In contrast to DeSantis’ and Biden’s false claims that recovery efforts were underway, the pair revealed that they hadn’t even heard from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and needed immediate assistance to help their relatives cover the cost of necessities like shelter and food.

The severely inadequate preparation statewide took a particularly graphic form in Florida’s prisons, particularly in hard-hit Lee County, where officials refused to evacuate a downtown Fort Myers jail despite the facility being in a mandatory evacuation zone and highly prone to flood surges from the nearby river.

In an interview with *New Times*, the daughter of one inmate revealed that toilets for inmates were overflowing with human waste and that jail staff were providing unsanitary, cloudy brown water to drink while jail authorities had access to cleaner beverages. The woman also said despite urgent warnings from emergency responders that evacuations be made, officials still refused to remove inmates.



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