

# Florida Governor DeSantis defends government inaction as Hurricane Ian death toll surpasses 100

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The death toll is mounting in the aftermath of Hurricane Ian, which made landfall on the Florida coast as a Category 4 storm last Wednesday, September 28, bringing devastating storm surges to the Cape Coral-Fort Myers area and deadly flooding across the state.

As of this writing, at least 103 people have been confirmed dead in Florida and five in North Carolina, though the total is expected to be higher as search and rescue teams are still working through the wreckage. Lee County, which includes Cape Coral and Fort Myers, alone accounts for 54 of the deaths, Sheriff Carmine Marceno said Monday, up from the county's previous death toll of 42. Neighboring Charlotte County, where the hurricane made landfall, has the second most recorded deaths at 24. As of now most of the deaths were drownings, according to officials.

Statewide more than 2,300 rescues have been made, and over 1,000 urban search and rescue personnel have checked 79,000 structures, according to Florida Governor Ron DeSantis in a press conference on Tuesday.

President Joe Biden is to meet with DeSantis on Wednesday, in order to give the appearance that something is being done by the state and federal governments about the disaster. Contrary to the image they are attempting to create, no substantial assistance is forthcoming. With the total estimated damage standing at between \$28 billion and \$47 billion, according to an estimate from CoreLogic, no commensurate sum has even been floated let alone formally proposed by the president or the governor. Meanwhile, over \$50 billion has been shoveled into fueling a war with Russia by the United States which stands to start a world-ending nuclear war.

The death toll in Lee County is likely in no small part due to the failure to issue timely evacuation orders, with residents being given a mandatory evacuation order on September 27—less than 24 hours before Ian made landfall—despite warnings that they were in the storm's path made since at least September 23. Over 700 people have been rescued in the county so far according to Marceno.

DeSantis defended the delayed evacuation order on Saturday in Fort Myers, telling reporters that county officials were following the data which showed the storm making landfall in Tampa Bay, which is in Hillsborough County, before shifting south to Lee County. The implication of this is that the government decided that the effect on businesses through the evacuation of two counties outweighed the loss of lives if the storm were to change course.

DeSantis, who is in the running to replace fascistic ex-President Donald Trump as leader of the Republican Party, no doubt is attempting to burnish his credentials as a ruthless defender of the profits of the financial elite. It is much in keeping with the policy of herd immunity pursued by his administration in Florida which has killed over 80,000 people in the state.

The governor has only just now announced the opening of the first Disaster Recovery Center, with DeSantis announcing that other Disaster Recovery centers are being opened by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Florida Division of Emergency Management.

Much as in previous responses by the political establishment to past storms, such as that of Hurricane Maria in 2017 which killed more than 3,000 in Puerto Rico; Hurricane Katrina, which killed 1,800 in New

Orleans in 2005, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic over the last two years which has killed more than 1 million, the policy of the government towards Hurricane Ian was one of malign neglect centered around protecting profits rather than lives.

The DeSantis acolyte Marcenio attempted to distract from the death and devastation by focusing on four individuals who the sheriff says are “illegal” immigrants suspected of unspecified burglaries, threatening that suspected looters may be summarily executed: “You might walk in. You’ll be carried out.” His fascistic threats make the priorities of the political establishment apparent: profits over lives. Meanwhile the personal property of the working and poor, and for that matter small businesses, are allowed to be destroyed with little or no aid from the state.

As of Tuesday evening 374,579 customers were still without power in Florida, according to PowerOutage.us. Lee accounted for the most outages at 201,329, a little under half of the customers in the county, while the nearby counties accounted for the vast majority of the rest of the outages. Over half of the customers in both DeSoto and Charlotte counties remain without power. Many in the areas affected by the storms still lack access to fresh drinking water and remain under boil-water notices, according to the Florida Department of Health.

As in other natural disasters, those who will be impacted the most are overwhelmingly the working class and the poor. Those who were unable to afford flood insurance are now left with ruined homes and nowhere to go. In the counties under evacuation orders, less than 20 percent of homes had coverage through the National Flood Insurance Program.

This is under conditions in which workers in Florida are already struggling to pay for housing. There are 2.24 million households in the state—more than a quarter of total households—which have incomes below \$50,000 a year and pay more than 30 percent of their income in rent or mortgage, according to the University of Florida’s Shimberg Center for Housing Studies.

The most the federal government pays out is \$40,000 for property damage repairs and another \$40,000 for car damage. Suffice it to say \$40,000 is far less than what is required to repair a destroyed home, or even to renovate from significant water logging, which can leave debilitating toxic mold that can cause permanent

lung damage or even death.

Florida has seen rental prices increase by more than 30 percent over the past two years. The loss in housing stock—through the destruction of houses—means that prices for homes are expected to increase even further.

As a result of the lack of alternatives, many are resorting to staying in the water-logged ruins of their homes or becoming homeless. Robert McClain, 67, a military veteran and retired construction worker, was interviewed by the *New York Times* in the garage of his water-logged rental home. He said he had few options but to live in his car. “I’m not running to go live in the Hilton, you know what I’m saying?” He concluded, “I’m totally screwed.”



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