

Biden appears with DeSantis in Fort Myers as death toll from Hurricane Ian continues to rise

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One week after Hurricane Ian struck Florida in the heavily populated vicinity of Fort Myers and began carving a path of destruction across the state, rescue crews continued searching for survivors as the total confirmed deaths from the storm rose to 110 on Wednesday evening.

Some news outlets are reporting that thousands remain missing amid the devastating structural obliteration and flooding caused by one of the most powerful hurricanes to ever make landfall in the US. With many more deaths expected in the days to come, Hurricane Ian has already surpassed the toll of Hurricane Andrew in 1992, which was a Category 5 storm when it hit Florida, killing 65 people.

The death toll cited by the state of Florida does not include at least 16 Cuban migrants who are missing after their boat capsized off the coastline during the hurricane. There were 27 people on board and nine were rescued by the US Coast Guard while two swam ashore at Stock Island, near Key West. The bodies of two who died have been recovered, but the Coast Guard is no longer searching for those still missing.

Rescue teams have evacuated 2,500 people from wrecked communities with no clear idea of who might be buried in the rubble. There is no list of missing persons available to search teams. Lee County Manager Roger DesJarlais admitted on Monday that officials have no idea how many people they are searching for and that first responders are relying on cadaver dogs.

The *Washington Post* published a list of the ages, genders and causes of death of those who are so far known to have perished in Florida during the hurricane and its aftermath. A significant percentage were either elderly or of retirement age. A few were killed in

vehicle accidents or from blunt force trauma. The vast majority drowned.

With public anger mounting over the attempt by federal and state government officials to offload responsibility for the horrific impact of the hurricane onto Florida residents who remained in the path of the storm, President Joe Biden arrived in Fort Myers on Wednesday afternoon to deliver a joint press conference with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, DeSantis, a Trump acolyte, continued to deflect blame for his lack of evacuation plans and the insufficient warnings given to people in Lee County about the hurricane by claiming that the “national regime media” wanted to see the storm cause major damage. The governor told the right-wing outlet *Florida’s Voice* that he was fed up with the “pissing match” in the press, referring to mounting criticism of the failure of his administration to respond early and decisively as the hurricane approached from the Southwest.

DeSantis has persistently defended the timing of the evacuation order in Lee County which was issued less than 24 hours before the hurricane struck the barrier island Coya Costa. A seven-year-old planning document on the website of the Lee County government says that “due to our large population and limited system, Southwest Florida is the hardest place in the country to evacuate in a disaster.” In other words, even though the area was known years ago to be vulnerable to a hurricane, nothing has been done by the state or federal governments to address the issue.

Under these conditions, Biden’s statements on Wednesday praising DeSantis, who has yet to acknowledge publicly that the president was

legitimately elected to office in 2020, are significant. At the press conference, Biden said, “What the Governor has done is pretty remarkable so far, what is, what he’s done.” The president said of the fascistic Republican governor, “we have different philosophies, and—but we worked hand in glove.”

This is not the first time that Biden and DeSantis have leaned on each other to prop up the discredited and despised US political establishment during a disaster in Florida. The president appeared with DeSantis before the assembled corporate media on July 1, 2021 to bolster the Florida governor following the catastrophic collapse of Champlain Towers South condominium in Surfside that killed 98 people in a matter of seconds a week earlier.

In that event, Biden placed his hand on DeSantis’s arm and said, “You know what’s good about this? The way you have cooperated, and it’s really important. ... We come together.” DeSantis returned the praise, thanking Biden for being “very supportive.” Aside from the nearly \$1 billion settlement with the families of those killed in Surfside, no one has been held accountable for the tragedy, despite evidence of collusion between local and state government officials with powerful Miami-area real estate interests that directly led to the collapse.

With Biden’s appearance in Fort Myers on Wednesday, the very same type of coverup is underway. After the president finished prattling on about how the federal government “will be here until it’s finished,” he got on a plane to head back to the White House to administer the top priority of the administration, the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine in which the US government has spent tens of billions of dollars.

Meanwhile, horrifying stories are being told about the fate of people who were killed by Hurricane Ian. The *Washington Post* reported that 40-year-old Nishelle Harris Miles was killed on the top floor of a vacation house that she and three friends had rented to celebrate her birthday.

The women huddled together on a bed as the storm surge rushed into the house and lifted the mattress up until they were “smashed against the ceiling.” The roof collapsed and a nail was lodged into Nishelle’s neck. Her friend, Chantel Maston, told the *Post*, “Nene died right there with us. She took her last breaths with us.”

CNN reported that Mike Verdream, 66, decided to ride out the storm and spoke to family members on Wednesday and told them the water in his house was four feet deep. His niece Stacey said, “It was a very brief call because he said he was very scared, and she’d never heard him like that, because he wasn’t that type of person. He’s always put on a brave face.”

Later attempts to reach Mike by phone were unsuccessful. Almost a week later, Stacey was told by a detective that her uncle’s body was found in a canal on Friday. His body was decomposed, and medical records were required to identify him.



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