

As search for victims ends, grim details emerge of deaths caused by Hurricane Ian

Kevin Reed
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The official number of deaths from Hurricane Ian reached 137 over the weekend with the majority of those in southwest Florida where the Category 4 storm first struck landfall with destructive power on September 28.

ABC News reported on Monday that authorities have concluded the major search for victims using cadaver dogs, while residents of Lee County and the city of Fort Myers were still sifting through the mud-covered rubble of their wrecked homes left behind by the storm surge that rose to as much as 18 feet of water.

Many have lost everything, and, ABC News said, “residents are bracing for what will be months, if not years, of work” to remove debris and “fights with insurance companies” to try and pull their lives back together.

As the details of what happened to both those who survived and those who died from the deadliest storm to strike Florida since the Labor Day Hurricane of 1935, the criminal negligence of the capitalist ruling establishment is evident. The state and federal governments failed to prepare the public even as powerful hurricanes fueled by climate change have hit the United States repeatedly over the last two decades.

While tens of billions have been spent on the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia—not to mention the trillions spent on the wars in the Middle East and Africa since 2001—the American ruling establishment has done little or nothing to put in place structures and evacuation systems to prevent the kind of devastation wrought by a series of deadly storms, beginning with Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which killed more than 1,800 people.

In a region of the US with a large percentage of retirees, who moved to Florida to get away from cold winters in the Northern states, many will not be able to

remain in the area with no place to live. Brenda Palmer was living with her husband Ralph in a mobile home in Fort Myers when the hurricane hit and destroyed it. She told the Associated Press, “I’m 86 years old, and I’m homeless. It’s just crazy. I mean, never in my life did I dream that I wouldn’t have a home. But it’s gone.”

The *New York Times* reported that the Comptons—Jane, 77, and Del, 81—from Louisville, Kentucky, bought a mobile home in Fort Myers for their retirement. The hurricane destroyed everything they owned, including their car, and they do not have homeowner’s insurance because their policy was cancelled in June due to the age of the mobile home. They are going back to Kentucky to move in with their daughter while they figure out what they will do next. “Our bubble has been burst,” Jane said.

The death toll from the hurricane will rise in the coming days as medical examiners’ offices have been overwhelmed with bodies requiring identification and autopsies to determine the causes of death. NBC News reported that the medical examiner for Charlotte County, Florida, requested the assistance of the Florida Emergency Mortuary Operations Response System to process more than 40 bodies in a facility designed to handle no more than six at a time.

Most of the victims were 50 years of age and older who drowned when they could not escape the rising flood waters. The Lee County medical examiner reported that a 54-year-old man died when he attempted to climb out of a window and became trapped.

Another resident of Lee County who was 73 years old “shot himself after seeing the damage due to the hurricane,” the medical examiner’s summary said. A 96-year-old man was found under a car in Charlotte County in high water. He was the oldest and among five Floridians aged 90 and older killed in the storm.

The medical examiner in Collier County, which is south of Fort Myers and includes the coastal community of Naples, Florida, released details of the five deaths in the area. Sarah Billings, 73, drowned after suffering a heart attack. Becky Higgie, 63, slipped in a puddle, fell down and later died of an aortic dissection. Sueann Shell, 64, drowned in her apartment from the hurricane storm surge. Rosemarie Santangelo, 73, drowned in her one-story home during the storm surge. Thomas Robert, 57, died from a heart attack after climbing seven flights of stairs when the lobby of his condo building flooded, and the elevator was not working.

The negligence of the ruling establishment and financial elite in the face of the devastating impact of hurricanes is also evident in the parasitic insurance industry. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on October 7 that lawsuits are being prepared to force insurance companies to pay for flood damage “that the carriers say they aren’t legally obligated to cover.”

Just over 40 percent of the homes in Lee and Collier counties are covered by flood insurance. The *Journal* reported that “standard homeowners’ policies in the U.S. for decades have excluded flood damage” and that billions of dollars are at stake as homeowners seek to rebuild. At the heart of the battle is distinguishing between hurricane wind damage and flood damage.

When a similar battle took place in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the plaintiffs’ lawyers won victories in the lower courts by exposing the ambiguous language in the policy documentation and getting decisions that favored the homeowners’ interpretation. However, the insurance corporations were able to win the cases on appeal, and many families got nothing.

In another aspect of the criminal exploitation of the hurricane damage by business interests, *USA Today* reported on October 6 that migrant workers are being used by disaster recovery firms offering cleanup services in the storm zone. Immigrant workers from Mexico, Venezuela, Guatemala and Honduras are being recruited and transported to Florida.

Ariadna Phillips of the South Bronx Mutual Aid said the companies from the multibillion-dollar disaster recovery industry “recruit migrants, take them down there, don’t pay them and get them deported. We’ve seen it with other hurricanes.” Phillips also said that in

some cases the workers take the jobs because they are homeless and penniless and then are told that their initial wages “will be used to cover transport and housing.”

In another incident in 2020, labor brokers recruited Venezuelan migrants from Miami and brought them to Michigan following heavy rains and historic flooding. “The workers were never paid what they were owed, and the company that recruited them violated the state’s COVID-19 safety protocols, which led to many of them getting sick.”

Saket Soni of the migrant advocacy group Resilience Force told *USA Today*, “Labor brokers routinely offer good rates, but when workers arrive in the disaster zone, the promises turn out to be false.”



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