

Over 1,000 people still missing as Maui fire death toll, and social anger, continue to rise

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As many as 1,300 people are still missing more than a week after an inferno, sparked by downed power lines and fueled by climate change, ripped through the Hawaiian island of Maui, killing at least 110 people and destroying the historic town of Lahaina.

Fires continue to burn on the island, threatening residents in the Upcountry town of Kula, located 25 miles to the east of Lahaina. As of this writing over 2,200 structures, overwhelmingly private residences, have been destroyed in Lahaina along with nearly two dozen homes in Kula, leaving thousands of people with no long-term housing.

In addition to the ongoing fire danger, residents in West Maui and Kula have been directed not drink or even boil the tap water in their homes due to contamination from the inferno. Last week, August 11, the Maui County government warned the fire “may have” caused “harmful contaminants, including benzene and other volatile organic chemicals, [to] enter the water system,” and that residents, thousands without homes or power, should instead use only bottled water.

The historic disaster in Maui is just one manifestation of the worsening global climate crisis for which the capitalist system is responsible and has no answer. Over the last couple days in the upper regions of the Northwest Territories (NWT) of Canada, wildfires have threatened the cities of Yellowknife and Hay River and destroyed the community of Enterprise.

Across Canada a record-shattering wildfire season has seen 33 million acres incinerated, “an area equivalent to Alabama or nine Connecticut,” according to the *Washington Post*. Choking black smoke from the fires has once again fouled the air across North America, descending as far south as

Yellowstone National Park.

In contrast to Lahaina, evacuation orders have already been issued for several First Nation communities and towns near Yellowknife, the capital city of the NWT and home to some 20,000 people. The outer edge of the fire is currently 10 kilometers west of the city, with officials warning it could reach the city by the weekend.

In Maui, there is little hope that most, or even a fraction, of the 1,300 missing will be found alive. Speaking at a press conference at the White House Wednesday, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) administrator Deanne Criswell revealed that the agency had deployed more than 40 cadaver sniffing dogs to search the area. The dogs were joined by a mobile mortuary unit and several refrigerated trucks, which will be used to store human remains. Not even half of the affected area has been searched yet.

In an attempt to quell massive anger over the indifferent government response to the disaster, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre confirmed on Wednesday that President Joe Biden, who previously offered “no comment,” would be flying to the island next week to meet with local government officials.

After an initial statement last Thursday on the fire, Biden refused to comment for four days as the scope and scale of the disaster and government indifference came into view. In an interview with the *New York Post*, Jay Awan, a cook and tiki carver, said he did not want Biden to come to the island. “He’s just coming to Maui to look good in front of the cameras.”

Among the dead in Maui are expected to be hundreds of children and elderly, who were given no warning about the impending disaster they faced. Lahaina children were sent home from school early the day of the blaze due to dangers posed by the high winds produced by Hurricane Dora, one of several warnings that went unheeded by the power company Hawaiian Electric, whose downed power lines were instrumental in starting the blaze.

In an Instagram video posted to his account 72 hours after the fires broke out, Leomana Turalde, a search and rescue volunteer in Lahaina and former Marine, detailed some of the massive failures in the lead-up to and after the fire, as he and others were trying to help those affected.

“Where were the alarms?” Turalde asked. “Where was the National Guard? Where was the search and rescue on day number one? Where are the drones up in the air? Why is it more important to put out the building fires in the middle of the town when they are already. ... Human life was not the priority, to me. That’s what I hear, that’s what I saw, that’s what I see, and that’s what I feel.

“I called Civil Defense and asked, ‘There was two hours, how come there was no leadership in the town to understand and recognize that a f***ing disaster was hitting?’ The whole town burned down, and you guys never sounded the alarm? Even after. Like not at all, period. We have a tsunami f***ing warning system that sounds every first of the month. And you guys couldn’t sound it at all, period? You guys can sound it for fake f***ing bombs ... but not when the whole entire town burns down? And then the guy that lives there is taking bodies out of the water and that guy is telling you, ‘Where the f*ck is the help?’”

Turalde explained that he talked to his “grandma today, her best friend is still missing. They never had any warnings, and the fire took over Lahaina in about two hours.”

In an interview with *NewsNation*, Maui resident Mike Cicchino confirmed that despite the fact that Hawaii has a multi-island-wide tsunami warning system, there

were “No sirens, no text messages, no police, no firemen coming by. The only reason I knew there was a fire is because I saw people running for their lives.”

Cicchino recalled that he “happened to go outside to check the power lines, and I noticed the whole neighborhood was on fire.” At that point Cicchino, his wife and their dogs tried to drive out of Lahaina. “The radio station we were listening to was just saying to evacuate. No information. No warning at all. I really feel like this could have been prevented.

“I wish there was more communication when the fire started. That fire started early that morning, and we were told at noon that the fire was out, and the firemen were going home and that everything was safe.”

Downed power poles, over 30 per *Hawaii News* as of August 8, led to not only several fires but forced the closure of the major roads in and out of Lahaina.

“Unfortunately, all of our routes were basically blocked by police, and it pigeonholed and forced us down into Lahaina town on Front Street, which is an absolute deathtrap,” Cicchino explained. “They were directing us to where the fire was going to end up.”

Cicchino explained that while attempting to evacuate, he, his wife and their dogs were caught in traffic forcing them to flee to the ocean for safety. For the next five to six hours until after 1:00 a.m., Cicchino and his wife struggled to survive as they were surrounded by fire, smoke and cooling ocean water, while the Coast Guard and US Navy were nowhere to be found.

“I saw babies out there that I never saw again. When I came back, when I was doing a headcount of the kids, the babies weren’t there anymore,” Cicchino recalled.



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