

Biden makes belated visit to Maui wildfire zone as death toll rises to 114 and 850 remain missing

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US President Joe Biden and his wife Jill Biden visited the Hawaiian island of Maui on Monday evening, the site of the deadliest US wildfire in more than a century.

Biden made the obligatory walk in front of video cameras on Front Street in the town of Lahaina, which burned to the ground on August 8 and where 114 people are confirmed dead with 850 still missing, before he delivered remarks to the media.

The president made the belated trip amid an uproar of popular anger in Hawaii and across the country over his indifference, made explicit when he offered “no comment” in response to questions last week about the disaster.

He was accompanied by a group of local and state Democratic Party officials, including Hawaii Governor Josh Green, US Senators Brian Schatz and Mazie Hirono and US Representatives Jill Tokuda and Ed Case.

Biden spoke for approximately eight minutes and claimed—even though it took almost a week for him to emerge from his beach vacation in Delaware to comment on the disaster—that the US government would “be with” the survivors of the fire “for as long as it takes.”

As he has done throughout his presidency every time a deadly disaster struck, Biden sought to use the death of his first wife and young daughter in an auto accident in 1972 to express empathy. “I know how it feels,” he said.

Biden gave few details about what the federal government was doing to address the needs of the thousands of people who are now homeless, but instead attempted to defend his pathetic and delayed response to the crisis.

He boasted about being “quick to provide 55,000 meals, 75,000 liters of water, beds, 10,000 blankets” for a town where the people have lost everything. He told homeowners, renters and nonprofits, “If you need help, you can visit the FEMA disaster recovery center at Maui College or go to disasterassistance.gov.”

Biden did not offer any explanation or preliminary analysis of the causes of the catastrophe, both natural and man-made, even though much has already been exposed in the two weeks since the fire. Leading the entire capitalist political establishment, the US president presented the wildfire as a matter of fact and the government’s response to it as perfectly acceptable.

The devastating wildfire, driven by multiple climate change conditions such as drought and high winds from Hurricane Dora in the Pacific to the south of the island, ripped through West Maui on August 8 and 9. Although environmentalists had warned about the dangers of just such a fire, government emergency officials issued no warning, and residents had no time to evacuate before the fast-moving fire and extreme heat destroyed everything in their path.

FEMA authorities say that survivors have been moved out of shelters and into hotels and homes, but the *Washington Post* reported last Friday that many people without shelter are camping in tents nightly on the beaches or living in their cars. “Others,” the report continued, “are living in churches and golf clubs as they begin to think about what will come next.”

Meanwhile, the work of providing food is being done by church and charity groups. The *Post* reported, “Citizen Church Maui in Kahana has become a main hub to feed those displaced from the fire, but also the many others who live along the coast but were far from

the flames and have nowhere to eat.” The church is serving 3,000 meals per day.

The inability and refusal of the federal government to provide for the essential needs of the Maui disaster survivors was highlighted inadvertently by Governor Green, who spoke after Biden, when he directed those who wish to support the residents of Maui to donate to the Red Cross.

As each day passes, those looking for missing relatives, including large numbers of children, are concluding that they have died. Governor Green told CBS’ “Face the Nation” on Sunday that just 27 of the 114 confirmed victims have been identified. The network reported on Monday, “Stories have started pouring in of children who were lost in the flames.”

In one instance, teenager Kenyero Fuentes was enjoying his last day of summer vacation when the fire hit his house. His adoptive mother, Luz Vargas, was working five miles from home when she and her husband tried to return to save their son, but they were blocked by traffic.

As CBS News reported, “When they were finally allowed to go to their house two days later, they found the body of their 14-year-old son, hugging the family’s dead dog. He was just days away from celebrating his 15th birthday.”

Biden’s trip to Maui was essentially an exercise in damage control. This was underscored in an interview by the *Washington Post* with Democratic Senator Brian Schatz, who strained to justify the inaction and lack of urgency from the White House.

“There are some times when a president promises support, but the Cabinet doesn’t really fully internalize the message,” Schatz said, adding, “And that’s not what’s happening here.”

Seeking to cover for Biden’s ineptitude and callousness, Schatz said, “[The president is] not the FEMA administrator so he’s not making [decisions] about when to open the road on West Maui or anything. His job is to tell the federal government to mobilize and mean it.”



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