

At least three dead from initial impact of Hurricane Idalia on Florida and Georgia

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Hurricane Idalia hit the Big Bend region of Florida on Wednesday morning as a Category 3 storm with winds reaching 125 miles per hour and bringing devastating storm surge flooding and destructive force.

The Associated Press (AP) reported, “Hurricane Idalia tore into Florida at the speed of a fast-moving train Wednesday, splitting trees in half, ripping roofs off hotels and turning small cars into boats before sweeping into Georgia as a still-powerful storm that flooded roadways and sent residents running for higher ground.”

The storm made landfall near Keaton Beach at 7:45 a.m., less than 90 miles from the Florida state capital of Tallahassee. Over 275,000 people in Florida were without power as of late Wednesday afternoon.

The National Weather Service in Tallahassee characterized Idalia as, “an unprecedented event” since no major hurricanes on record have ever passed through the bay abutting the Big Bend. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) historical database, there have been only two other Category 3 hurricanes to hit this area of Florida.

The last one was in 1950, when Hurricane Easy made landfall just east of Cedar Key with 120 mph winds, then abruptly pivoted south to a second landfall near Hernando Beach. The other Category 3 storm in the region was the September 1896 hurricane, whose eyewall raked across Cedar Key with estimated 125 mph winds.

Residents who hunkered down on the island of Cedar Key in the present storm to look after neighbors who were unable to evacuate reported that Idalia brought flooding that was chest high, downed trees and debris-blocked roads and exploding propane tanks.

Two people died in weather-related car accidents, according to Florida Highway Patrol. The state police

said a 59-year-old man was killed near Gainesville while driving in “extremely rainy conditions” around 6:00 a.m. when he hit a tree after veering into a ditch.

A 40-year-old man was also killed in a weather-related accident in Pasco County north of Tampa early Wednesday morning. The driver was in a Ford Ranger traveling eastbound on Saint Joe Road in “inclement weather” when he lost control of his vehicle and struck a tree.

The hurricane weakened to a Category 1 storm after landfall with maximum sustained winds of 75 miles per hour, according to the National Hurricane Center. The storm remained a hurricane as it crossed into Georgia during the day Wednesday and forecasters said it would punish the Carolinas overnight as a tropical storm.

A man was killed by a falling tree as he was trying to clear a blocked roadway in Valdosta, Georgia. Lowndes County Sheriff Ashley Paulk told the AP, “The guy was out working on cleaning up a tree in the road, just a local citizen doing good things. A big gust of wind came up and dropped another tree, killed him instantly.” A second person was seriously injured by the same tree and a sheriff’s deputy suffered minor injuries, Paulk said.

The hurricane is impacting some of the same areas that were hit by the deadly Hurricane Ian last September. Residents of Fort Myers Beach whose homes were devastated by Ian were reporting new destruction and flooding in their homes from Idalia.

Residents and officials from Dixie County, located between Tallahassee and Gainesville, told the non-profit, independent news organization Grist that the sparsely populated area “was wholly unprepared for Hurricane Idalia, a Category 3 storm fueled by exceptionally hot waters in the Gulf of Mexico.”

Mandy Lemmermen, the battalion chief for the Dixie

County fire department, told Grist, “We’ve never seen anything like this.” Lemmermen, who was hunkered down in an operations center in the county seat of Cross City, added, “You can’t survive this.”

Grist’s report noted that residents in Dixie County do not have the resources to deal with flooding from Idalia. “The median household income in Dixie County is around \$44,000, far below the national average. A recent report from United Way of the Big Bend found that far more families in the region are struggling to meet basic needs than in the rest of the state,” the report states.

The Grist report also says that 30 percent of the residents in Dixie and Taylor counties live in mobile or manufactured homes, “which can sustain huge damage or collapse altogether during big wind storms.” According to FEMA data, in three Big Bend counties with a total population of 80,000, there are only 2,000 homes with flood insurance purchased from the government.

The unpreparedness of the working class communities in Florida’s Big Bend coastline for the entirely predictable massive hurricane is one part of the negligence of the state and federal government in the face of capitalist-induced climate change and its increasingly destructive and deadly impacts.

Climate scientists and hurricane researchers have pointed to the fact, for example, that Hurricane Idalia fed off of the warm water in the region where the storm picked up energy before hitting Florida. As Colorado State University hurricane researcher Phil Klotzbach told the AP, “It’s 88, 89 degrees (31, 32 degrees Celsius) over where the storm’s going to be tracking, so that’s effectively rocket fuel for the storm. It’s basically all systems go for the storm to intensify.”

On Wednesday, fascistic Florida Governor and candidate for the Republican Party nomination for president in 2024, Ron DeSantis, sought to divert attention from his blatant refusal to acknowledge or do anything to prepare the public for increasingly frequent and more powerful storms due to global warming.

Speaking before the media, DeSantis focused on making threats to supposed looting taking place in the areas impacted by the hurricane. He said, “This part of Florida—you got a lot of advocates and proponents of the 2nd Amendment and I’ve seen signs in different people’s yards in the past after these disasters and I

would say probably here, ‘You loot, we shoot.’”

Meanwhile, President Biden made an appearance at the White House and offered empty words of sympathy, similar to those he mouthed just two weeks ago to the victims of the Maui wildfires which killed at least 115 people. “We have to remain vigilant, and there’s much more to do,” Biden said and then did not specify any actions the federal government was taking to provide emergency assistance to the people of Florida, other than to say that FEMA administrator Deanne Criswell would fly to Florida to meet with Governor DeSantis.



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