Five dead in Florida, one in Georgia, as Hurricane Debby floods US southeast

Bryan Dyne
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At least six deaths have so far been attributed to Hurricane Debby, the latest storm of this year's Atlantic hurricane season. The storm system emerged on July 26 as it moved over the Lesser Antilles, a chain of islands in the Caribbean which includes Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados and the US territory Puerto Rico.

It intensified as it traveled across Cuba as a tropical storm before forming into a Catergory 1 hurricane on August 4 and making landfall near Steinhatchee, Florida. Debby has since weakened into a tropical storm but is expected to strengthen somewhat as it passes over warm Atlantic Coast waters after passing over Georgia and South Carolina and heads up the Eastern Seaboard.

Weaker winds, however, have not stopped the torrential downpour and flooding brought by Debby, which has produced storm surges as high as two feet at Fort Myers, Florida and as much as 18.86 inches of rainfall, recorded in Parrish, Florida. Towns remain flooded across the state and thousands have had to be rescued.

Of those who have died, five were in Florida and one in Georgia. They include a 38-year-old woman and 12-year-old girl who died in a car crash, likely caused by flooding, along with a seriously injured 14-year-old boy; a 64-year-old truck driver who lost control of his semi-truck as a result of flooding and crashed into a canal; a 13-year-old boy who died when a tree fell on his mobile home; a 48-year-old man who drowned while attempting to ride out the hurricane in his sailboat; a 19-year-old young man who died when a tree fell on his home.

More deaths are likely as the tropical storm heads north from Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina to Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, western Pennsylvania, New York, New England and Quebec.

The latest forecast from the National Hurricane Center (NHC), which is run by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, is for "potentially historic heavy rainfall across eastern South Carolina" for the rest of the week, issued after Debby slowed its advance north on Tuesday. It has further warned of storm surge conditions through Thursday and an at least 70 percent risk of flash flooding in Savannah, Georgia, Charleston, South Carolina, and Wilmington and Raleigh, North Carolina.

In addition, the NHC has predicted that the maximum amount of rainfall in certain regions may reach 25 inches, "bringing areas of catastrophic flooding across portions of the eastern half of South Carolina, and southeast North Carolina through Friday."

There is currently a "marginal" risk of flash flooding as far west as Atlanta, Georgia and as far north as Detroit, Michigan, and a "slight" risk as far north as Albany, New York.

Flooding, high winds, fallen trees and other hazards have also knocked out power for hundreds of thousands. When Debby made landfall on Monday morning, nearly 250,000 Florida residents and 26,000 Georgia residents were out of power. At least 81,000 remain without power as of this writing in Florida, 9,000 in Georgia, and 10,000 in South Carolina.

Like all natural disasters, the death and destruction caused by Hurricane Debby reveals the sharp class issues that dominate society. Those who die in every such event are not the rich, who are able to hunker down in well-stocked mansions or flee the path of the storm altogether, but families and young people caught in the flooding and destruction, as well as workers still trying to deliver goods to areas besieged by the storm.

And those that survive often have very few resources

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with which to recover. Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina have populations with median annual wages of $45,070, $45,480, $42,220 and $45,440, respectively, all of which fall below the national median of $48,060, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

At the same time, those who live in these states must spend anywhere from a quarter to a third, or more, of their monthly wages on rent alone, making it extraordinarily difficult for the majority of those impacted to recover from a sudden disaster.

Moreover, even fewer have insurance. Less than one-fifth of property owners in Florida have flood insurance, and while it's not yet clear how much damage Debby has caused, earlier statistics show that only about a quarter of the damages will be covered. As an example, when Hurricane Florence hit North and South Carolina in 2018, it caused about $30 billion in damages, of which only $7 billion was insured.

In addition, MSN reports that flood insurance companies are unwilling to take on more risk, especially since Hurricane Matthew in 2015. One of the key reasons is that the insurance companies themselves are unable to get insurance from capital markets against the inevitability of annual flood damage.

In other words, the position of the capitalist ruling elite is that those most suffering from natural disasters are to be left to their own devices.

Such attitudes are all the more criminal given that the damage caused by hurricanes and other extreme weather events are increasingly caused by climate change. As global warming continues unabated, the result of the unrestrained release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere by capitalist production, hurricane seasons become more and more destructive.

As the WSWS reported last month, not only are hurricanes becoming more powerful, the hurricane season itself is beginning earlier and earlier as the years progress. Hurricane Beryl, which made landfall on the continental US on July 8, was the earliest Category 4 and Category 5 hurricane ever recorded, reaching wind speeds of up to 165 mph on July 2.

The total damage from that hurricane exceeds $5 billion and caused 64 confirmed fatalities.

These early and destructive hurricanes are in line with predictions that this year's hurricane season will be among the most active in recorded history. There have been record ocean and air temperatures across Earth for the past 12 months as a result both of global warming and the cyclical warming event El Niño, which makes the conditions in the Atlantic Ocean very favorable to producing powerful hurricanes for the rest of the year.

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