Death toll passes 80 in Texas flash flood catastrophe

Chase Lawrence, Patrick Martin
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The death toll climbed past 80 in the flash flood disaster in central Texas, as rescue and recovery workers continued their search for survivors and victims into Sunday night. The vast majority of the deaths, 68, are in Kerr County, northwest of San Antonio, where the Guadalupe River overflowed its banks in a wall of water as much as 30 feet high.

Those who died in Kerr County included 40 adults and 28 children, many of them from the Mystic Camp, a sleepaway Christian girls camp on the edge of the river which was inundated in the early morning hours of Friday, July 4. Eleven girls and one adult are still missing from the camp, which housed 750 people, including children as young as eight.

Heavy rains Sunday obstructed the rescue and recovery efforts. By the evening, officials in Kerr County urged journalists and the few remaining local residents in the flood zone to get to higher ground, as a new surge of river water was considered likely.

Torrential rains stemming at least in part from the breakup of Tropical Storm Barry over the Gulf of Mexico were the immediate cause of the flooding, but both climate change and the impact of Trump administration budget cuts certainly played a role in the massive human toll.

The Texas "Hill Country" is a vast arc of rough and broken ground, crisscrossed by gullies, extending from the Dallas-Ft. Worth metropolitan area west and south around Austin and San Antonio. The rivers that drain the relatively dry region can collect massive amounts of water runoff in a heavy storm, particularly one that lingers for several days, as was the case last week.

There is a long history of flooding on the Guadalupe River, but this is by far the worst of the dozen or so such disasters in the past century. The worst previous flood took the lives of ten girls at another sleepover camp along the river in 1987.

Despite this, Kerr County officials have rebuffed calls to set up an early warning system against flash floods, similar to that used in tornado-prone regions of the US, claiming it would be too costly. While largely rural, the county is not without resources, with a middle-income population of more than 50,000 on the outskirts of the San Antonio metropolitan area.

The area is dominated politically by extreme right Republicans who oppose nearly all forms of public spending. Trump carried Kerr County with 77 percent of the vote last November. The local congressman is Republican Chip Roy, one of the most right-wing members of the fascist House Freedom Caucus.

Residents reported receiving little to no warning before the flood started. Many were awakened to the floods themselves, with National Weather Service warnings only arriving via phone alerts at 1 a.m. Friday, when most people were already asleep. Only a flood watch was previously issued on Thursday, which cautioned the region to prepare for 'excessive runoff' with rainfall expected to be "5 to 7 inches." Instead, from 10 to 12 inches fell in a matter of hours, and there were isolated readings of up to 16 inches of rain.

The Guadalupe River rose 26 feet within 45 minutes according to state officials, leaving those awakened to the flooding little if any time to respond.

Christopher Flowers, who was quoted in the Associated Press, noted that nothing in the forecast alarmed him, and he only learned about the flood when he woke up in the middle of the night in ankle-deep water. "What they need is some kind of external system, like a tornado warning that tells people to get out now," Flowers, 44, said.

On Wednesday, the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM) was activated, saying there were

"increased threats of flooding in parts of West and Central Texas." Swift-water rescue teams and other types of rescue equipment were moved into the area because some models predicted high levels of rainfall.

In Texas and around the world, floods have become worse and more frequent as a result of ongoing global warming. So too have other varieties of severe weather events. The Trump administration, as part of its rampage against science, has effectively forbidden any discussion of climate change by disaster management agencies, while also inflicting severe cuts on the National Weather Service (NWS) and its parent agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

During the budget-cutting spree initiated by Elon Musk and the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), some 2,300 jobs were eliminated at NOAA, as well as 600 at the NWS. Both of the NWS offices near the flood zone, in San Antonio and San Angelo, were understaffed. The meteorologist at the San Antonio office in charge of liaison with local disaster management agencies took early retirement in April as a result of the DOGE purge.

These cuts led to a situation in which offices for predicting tornadoes were above the 20 percent vacancy levels experts say is critical. The number of weather balloons, necessary for timely and accurate prediction of a number of weather phenomena including floods, decreased by around 15 to 17 percent. Some local NWS offices reduced their twice-daily balloon launches or even suspended them altogether due to a lack of staffing.

The Democrats are also directly implicated in the disaster, offering only the most perfunctory opposition to the DOGE rampage, then passing a continuing resolution backed by Trump to avoid a federal shutdown. As Trump's $4 trillion tax and spending bill passed Congress last week, the Democrats did nothing but wring their hands, refusing to call a single protest.

They claim to oppose the cuts in NOAA, Department of Health and Human Services and other agencies responsible for the well-being of hundreds of millions of Americans. But the funds cut from these agencies are going towards the buildup of the military-intelligence apparatus, which the Democrats fully support, as well as the enormous deportation machine that Trump is constructing.

Trump has dismissed suggestions that these cuts played any role in the central Texas tragedy.

"If you look at that, what a situation that all is, and that was really the Biden setup. That was not our setup, but I wouldn't blame Biden for it either," he said, after a weekend at his New Jersey golf club. He claimed that given the scale of the flooding, no amount of preparation would have made a difference. Instead he resorted to the usual reassurances of capitalist politicians in the face of disaster, hailing the patriotism of first responders and offering his prayers "for all of the families impacted by this horrible tragedy."

Meanwhile, Trump's fascist allies in Congress raised yet another conspiracy theory to explain the disaster, with Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) saying she would introduce a bill forbidding "weather modification" by government agencies or private individuals.

The catastrophe in central Texas is a crime of capitalism. Dozens are dead not because such events are unpredictable, but because society is organized around the profit interests of the financial oligarchy, not human need.