

US: Anger on first anniversary of Hurricane Sandy

By Philip Guelpa
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On the first anniversary of Hurricane Sandy's catastrophic landfall on coastal New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, the promises of assistance made by politicians have fallen far short of expectations. Many thousands of residents who saw their homes destroyed or heavily damaged have been effectively abandoned to their fate. While problems in the financial district and wealthy neighborhoods of lower Manhattan were quickly addressed, working class neighborhoods throughout the region have been left behind.

Many victims of the storm have faced interminable delays, bureaucratic red tape and indifference as they seek redress for their losses. Congress appropriated a total of \$60.2 billion for hurricane relief and reconstruction, yet a large portion of this promised federal assistance has yet to be disbursed to local communities and families. The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development has allocated \$5.4 billion in Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) money for state and local governments, for example, but only \$2 billion has been spent thus far.

In the aftermath of the storm, big business politicians scrambled to show their "concern" and schedule photo-ops and prominent television interviews. New Jersey Republican governor Chris Christie was perhaps the most blatant example. Christie, whose presidential ambitions have been talked about for several years, made a transparent attempt to portray himself as "America's governor," in a fashion similar to the "America's mayor" persona adopted by Rudolph Giuliani in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attack in New York City.

A year later, many residents are enraged by Christie's broken promises and attempts to derive political benefit from Hurricane Sandy. The *New York Times* recently reported on a legislative meeting in Toms River, the large township known for its Republican political leanings that was severely affected by the storm. Several hundred angry constituents turned out for the hearing, with some shouting denunciations of Christie, who has not turned up recently in the area.

Victims of the storm are particularly disgusted over Christie's posturing as their savior. The New Jersey governor has made extravagant use of television appearances and paid advertising. An ad campaign christened "Stronger than the

storm," supposedly aimed at bolstering tourism, used \$4.7 million in federal money to highlight Christie, who is running for reelection. He first promised that boardwalks affected by the storm would be open by Memorial Day in May of this year, then by Labor Day in September. Now, he admits it will be 18 to 24 months before recovery.

At least 26,000 New Jersey residents remain displaced a year after the storm, and many thousands more are living in damaged homes with another winter approaching. Thousands of homes have been abandoned, with people living in trailers or other temporary shelter. In many cases, federal and private insurance payments, when they do arrive, are insufficient to cover reconstruction costs, leaving residents no option but to walk away from their homes.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reports that 261,884 people in New Jersey registered for federal disaster assistance following Sandy. More than 61,000 applications have been approved, but nearly 72,000 have been rejected and another 100,000 are still pending. In the face of public anger, FEMA recently extended the deadline to file claims through April 2014.

A New Jersey advocacy group, Fair Share Housing Center, reports that poorer residents of the state have not received their fair share of assistance. While 60 percent of grants to help people stay in their homes were earmarked for those with low and moderate incomes, only 37 percent of the grants have gone to those families.

Christie's role in the hurricane aftermath does not mean, of course, that only the Republicans are responsible for the virtual abandonment of tens of thousands of families. It was President Barack Obama who responded to the New Jersey governor's call after the storm and who made joint appearances with Christie that became national news. And Obama's Housing and Urban Development secretary, Shaun Donovan, in a statement that flies in the face of reality, bragged just days ago, "If you think about the fact that 650,000 homes were damaged, the vast majority of the work that's needed to get people back in their homes and get businesses back operating is behind us."

The hard-hit areas of New York and Connecticut are facing problems similar to those in New Jersey. Residents report immense frustration at interminable paperwork and conflicts

between the requirements of various government programs. Many who began to rebuild with their own money now find that they are ineligible for government grants.

Expanded federal flood zone maps and new flood insurance regulations mean that large areas are now subject to substantially higher insurance rates or requirements to raise structures above flood levels, placing unbearable financial burdens on many in coastal areas. According to one report, some New York City property owners will face increases in annual flood insurance premiums of between \$5,000 and \$10,000, a jump that will be prohibitive for most. This is taking place at the same time as federal subsidies for flood insurance are being cut.

In New York City, the number of properties that will be required to purchase flood insurance will double by 2015, an increase of about 32,000. Currently, 35 percent of those required to carry insurance do not, but the higher premiums mean that this number will now increase drastically, setting the stage for even greater disaster when the next storm hits.

One of the hardest hit New York City neighborhoods was Breezy Point, located on the Rockaway Peninsula in the borough of Queens. This low-lying area was hit not only by a 13-foot-high storm surge, but by a massive fire that lasted for hours due to the inability of fire fighters to reach the area. Of the 2,800 homes in the neighborhood, 200 were destroyed and another 1,500 severely damaged. One year later, reconstruction has barely begun. It is estimated that only about half of the former residents have returned.

City officials recently stated that they are unsure whether they have enough money to cover all of the damage claims resulting from Hurricane Sandy. The administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg has allocated \$648 million in its “Build It Back” program for housing reconstruction out of \$1.6 billion it has so far received from the federal government, the remainder going to other programs. However, to date, 24,000 claims for housing have been made, amounting to \$2.4 billion. Many of these claims have not yet been paid, and the city has not reported how many displaced persons have so far been returned to their homes. Future funding from the federal government is uncertain.

In an attempt to “close the books” on Sandy, the city recently terminated its program of subsidies to hotels for people displaced by the storm (see “New York City throws Hurricane Sandy victims out on the street”).

New York State attorney general Eric Schneiderman has revealed that the Red Cross and three other charitable organizations are still holding millions of dollars in donations they raised to assist Sandy victims.

The financial stress resulting from Sandy has made it impossible for many homeowners to keep up with their mortgage payments. The nonprofit Center for New York City Neighborhoods reports that, during the last year, more than a thousand families received foreclosure notices in

neighborhoods hard hit by Sandy. In the city as a whole, foreclosures are up 33 percent from the previous year. The largest increase was in the borough of Queens, which was severely affected by the storm.

The disbursement of funds for repair and upgrade of infrastructure has also been slow and inadequate. For example, New York City’s Health and Hospitals Corporation, which administers public hospitals in the city, has still not received money from FEMA to begin construction of flood-protection projects to prepare for future storms. A number of city hospitals, including Bellevue, were seriously hit by Sandy.

Forty-five public schools, nearly half of the 106 damaged by Sandy, are still undergoing repair. In seven schools, there is no functioning fire alarm system. Instead, there is a “human alarm system,” consisting of monitors who are stationed at various locations in the buildings to look for smoke. This absurd and potentially catastrophic situation exists because FEMA has not yet approved a repair plan for the schools’ overall electrical systems.

The painfully slow pace in restoration of basic services, such as medical care, is illustrated on the Rockaway Peninsula. Many medical facilities were closed due to storm damage, and only a few have so far reopened. The situation is so dire that a charitable organization, Doctors of the World USA, has opened a free clinic in the Rockaway Park section of Queens. Nearly a quarter of the population in the Rockaways have no medical insurance.

The aftermath of the historic hurricane that hit the Northeast US exactly a year ago illustrates what was seen at the time of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and on other occasions. Hurricane Sandy was a natural phenomenon, but its effects on millions of people were compounded by the slow, disorganized and inadequate response of the profit system and its political representatives. The disorganization is not simply an expression of incompetence, but of the fundamental contradictions of the system and the priorities that it upholds. A huge section of the population, living precariously even under “normal” circumstances, is pushed to the breaking point when disaster strikes.

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