

Southern West Virginia communities devastated by flash floods

By Joe McGee
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The death toll from the flash floods that swept through West Virginia Thursday evening has risen to 26, as emergency crews assess the damage in the most heavily impacted areas. Governor Earl Ray Tomblin declared a state of emergency in 44 of 55 state counties Friday.

Over the weekend, first responders and volunteers worked to provide relief and assistance to families stranded in various communities where road access was severely limited. As of Saturday, the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) had approved the state's request for assistance in the three most affected counties of Greenbrier, Kanawha and Nicholas counties. Workers for the agency were expected in the area on Sunday to begin registering victims, according to West Virginia Metro News.

In Kanawha County, where the Elk River rose, some residents reported as much as 40 feet of water reaching the second floor of homes and rendering them uninhabitable.

Many people in the town of Richwood, located in Nicholas County, were left homeless and points of access were closed off due to roads being destroyed. A local business owner described the pavement having been peeled back by the force of the water, along with the older brick underneath, which left 3-foot gouges in the roadways. Due to its relatively remote location it was difficult, as of late Saturday, to determine how many homes were destroyed and how many people have been left stranded.

Richwood was an impoverished community prior to this tragedy and presents a snapshot of the decline of American capitalism since the early 1970s. For much of the 20th century the town experienced comfortable standards of living due to the growth of the coal and timber industry. Many companies thrived there due to

the town's access to local hardwoods in one of the most heavily forested parts of the state. This also spawned small businesses that produced value added finished wood products for the furniture industry.

In the early 1970s as rates of profit fell, much of the assembly of furniture and other wood products companies shifted to cheaper labor platforms in other parts of the world. The decline in the lumber industry coupled with the collapse of coal mining left Richwood economically devastated.

Today the community reflects this long-term distress. Many empty homes dot its hillsides, some with the interiors burned out, often due to accidents related to illegal drug production. The one grocery store in the community closed in 2014, leaving residents to shop for food at local gas stations and convenience stores. Trying to access the closest grocery in Craigsville is often limited by the fact that many residents cannot afford or have access to a vehicle.

Many residents and small business owners lack flood insurance due to affordability, and now will rely on FEMA to see if they qualify for individual assistance, which is reportedly more difficult to acquire than the more general category of public assistance.

Richwood has been subject to periodic flooding and it was the rising Cherry River that led to flooding of the town. The US Army Corps of Engineers had previously begun impact studies indicating the need to build a dam along the south fork of the Cherry River, creating an artificial lake to capture water. This would have greatly benefitted the town, but no serious action was taken. Under capitalism in the United States there is plenty of money for endless war and tax cuts for the ruling class, but little for repairing and updating the country's deteriorating infrastructure.

By contrast, many in the working class of West

Virginia have mobilized to help the flood victims in the surrounding area. In more populous areas of the coalfields of southern West Virginia, such as Beckley and Huntington, local residents are responding to calls for assistance by bringing needed supplies to destination points where the items will be shipped to the affected areas. The items most in need are food, water, baby food, diapers, cleaning and sanitary supplies, blankets and pet food. Throughout the course of the day on Saturday people were seen bringing needed supplies to the various destination points.

As of Sunday morning there were still approximately 15,000 people without power. The days to come will continue to reveal the magnitude of this historic tragedy. The cleanup efforts will last for weeks.

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