

Hurricane Irma heads towards Florida after tearing through the Caribbean

By Matthew Taylor
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Hurricane Irma, one of the most powerful Atlantic hurricanes on record, is on its way to south Florida after devastating several Caribbean islands with 175-mile-per-hour winds and massive storm surges. At least 14 people have been confirmed dead so far.

As of this writing, Irma is passing to the north of Cuba as a Category Five Hurricane producing high winds and rain. On Thursday, after bypassing the Dominican Republic and Haiti to the north, the most dangerous section of hurricane had a direct hit on the British overseas territory of Turks and Caicos. Some 35,000 live just ten feet above sea level with storm surges expected to be double that.

On Wednesday morning, Hurricane Irma essentially destroyed the small island of Barbuda with 155-mile-per-hour winds and surges wiping out 90 percent of its structures, in what the prime minister said was “like a bomb being thrown on a city.” Severe damage was also caused in the French territory of St. Martin.

Hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans remain without power after hurricane winds downed power lines and severely damaged the island’s public electrical system, which has suffered years of neglect and mass layoffs due to privatization efforts and the island’s crippling economic crisis.

Seventy percent of the US territory’s 3.4 million US citizens lost power in the storm and 17 percent of the island does not have access to safe water. Officials are warning of the continued danger of flash floods. The ports remained closed as obstructions are cleared and the infrastructure is checked for any damage. Puerto Rico imports 80 percent of its food.

Residents in Puerto Rico and throughout the trail of destruction in the Caribbean are bracing for another storm, Hurricane Jose, which is gaining strength east of the Lesser Antilles, and has been bumped up to a Category Three storm.

Hurricane Irma is expected to make landfall in Florida as a Category Four hurricane on Sunday around 2 pm. Some 700,000 residents of south Florida counties of Miami-Dade,

Broward, Monroe, and part of Palm Beach have been ordered to leave their homes in the largest mass evacuation in the state in 12 years. Thousands of flights have been canceled at the Miami-Dade International Airport, stranding passengers trying to flee.

Grocery stores throughout Florida are already being emptied of canned food, bottled water, candles, batteries, and other essential survival supplies. Those with the resources are evacuating the state by car, by plane, and by any other method available. The vast majority of the state’s population, however, lack the means to leave and will face the life-threatening storm as it makes its anticipated landfall this weekend.

Gas stations throughout the state are experiencing fuel shortages as residents rush to fill up their tanks. On the highway leading from the Florida Keys to the mainland, traffic is backed up for miles.

As in Houston and throughout Texas, the lack of resources, advanced planning, and the presence of widespread poverty, in combination with the reactionary and incompetent political establishment, has greatly increased the danger to millions of Florida residents.

In Polk County, just north of Tampa-St. Petersburg, Sheriff Grady Judd has vowed to check the identity of everyone attempting to enter the county’s shelter and arrest anyone with an outstanding warrant. He also said law enforcement will deny entry to any convicted sex offenders. Both Governor Rick Scott and Attorney General Pam Bondi declined to condemn Grady’s comments.

Though the sheriff’s department claims their deputies will not be checking immigration status, Grady’s threatening statements will surely have a chilling effect on the county’s 18,000 undocumented immigrants, many of whom lack state-issued IDs.

The sheriff’s actions will directly imperil the lives of thousands of people who would rather sit out the storm without aid than face arrest or deportation for something as little as an unpaid traffic ticket.

Florida is home to tens of thousands of migrant

farmworkers, many of whom live in dilapidated trailers tucked in semirural areas. Many more native-born residents have substandard housing in the state, which has an official poverty rate of 16 percent.

In Fort Myers, a city in the southwest of Florida with a population of 70,000, there are no public shelters available. Local high schools and other buildings typically used for shelters all fall below the legally required standard for a structure to withstand hurricane force winds. The nearest shelter is in the neighboring city of South Fort Myers.

Widespread price gouging is being reported throughout the state. As of Thursday, the Florida State Attorney General's hotline had received over three thousand reports of price gouging, including by major companies. Delta Airlines was forced to issue an apology after a customer reported that the price for her ticket from Miami to Phoenix was increased by 600 percent, from \$547 to \$3,200. The company blamed expedia.com for the price increase. Amazon was also forced to offer its customers refunds after reports surfaced that the online retailer had hiked prices on emergency supplies, including charging \$100 dollars for a case of water.

Florida Governor Rick Scott issued a statement insisting, "If you live in any evacuation zones and you're still at home, LEAVE! ... Do not ignore evacuation orders." With gas stations running out of supplies and nowhere to go, residents are justifiably angry with the evacuation orders. "I'm not still in Florida because I want to be. I am poor, and I'm stuck," read one social media post. Another said, "WE CANT F.... LEAVE!!!!!! All gas stations outta gas. Traffic is outrageous. Flights are \$1000+ It's not even possible at this point."

Earlier this week, the Army Corps of Engineers began a hurried release of water from Lake Okeechobee. While officials claim there is a low risk, heavy rains and a storm surge could cause a breach of the levee around the lake, which was identified as one of the nation's most vulnerable dams. This would result in massive flooding into residential areas like that which occurred in New Orleans and Houston, in Hurricanes Katrina and Harvey respectively.

Throughout the state, there are an estimated 2.5 million homes in flood hazard zones, according to FEMA. Amongst that number, only 42 percent have flood insurance policies. Over the course of the last five years, the number of flood insurance policies in Florida has declined by 15 percent. In Miami-Dade County, the number of policies has declined by seven percent in the last five years, from 371,000 to 342,000. In Broward County, in that same period, the number of policies declined by 44 percent, from 372,000 to 207,000.

In 2012 Congress passed a bill approving the hiking of insurance rates. Since that time, the rate of coverage has

steadily declined. Homeowners with federally backed mortgages are legally required to hold flood insurance if they live in a high-risk area. Many homeowners, however, stop making payments on their policies due to financial hardship.

In the southern counties of Miami-Dade, Collier, Broward, and Monroe, all of which are under partial evacuation orders, the number of homes protected by insurance policies is a mere 34.3 percent.

It must be noted, however, that homeowners in federally designated flood zones are only a fraction of the population under threat. Millions of residents who are renters, students, retirees living in assisted living homes, as well as the state's large homeless population, face the prospect not only of rising flood waters but also the destructive winds of Hurricane Irma, which will undoubtedly destroy many homes and businesses. Widespread power outages, food and water shortages, lack of medicine and emergency personnel will follow.

In 1992, Hurricane Andrew—a Category Five storm—caused \$26.5 billion in damages, killed 65 people and destroyed 63,000 homes. In the 25 years since Andrew, the population of south and central Florida has grown by more than six million people, according to the *New York Times*. That population surge has been accompanied by the construction of new homes, apartments, businesses, and other real estate. The *Times* estimates that if Andrew occurred today it would cause over \$100 billion in damages.

Hurricane Irma, which is much larger, could be even more damaging than Andrew.

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