

Hurricane Florence makes landfall in North Carolina

By Patrick Martin
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Hurricane Florence, one of the most powerful storms ever to strike the US mainland, came ashore early Friday morning north of Wilmington, North Carolina. The hurricane generated winds of more than 100 miles per hour and drove a ten-foot storm surge over beaches and boardwalks along a wide swathe of coastline.

The worst impact of the storm surge was expected at just before noon on Friday, when the water driven by the hurricane piles up on top of the high tide along the Carolina coast.

Lower winds and lesser storm surges extended along the entire Atlantic coastline of North Carolina and much of the South Carolina coast as well. More than ten million people live in the area covered by hurricane watches and warnings.

While the storm's strength was lowered from Category 4 to Category 2 on the Saffir-Simpson scale, the storm was actually strengthening. It was expanding in size even as the winds near its core, the basis of the Saffir-Simpson scale, slowed somewhat, from about 135 miles per hour to 105 miles per hour.

The storm had enormous breadth as it made landfall, with a cloud field four times as large as the state of Ohio, while its winds generated open-ocean waves of up to 50 feet high. Hurricane-force winds, 74 miles per hour or higher, extended 80 miles from the eye, while tropical storm-force winds, 39 miles per hour or higher, extended nearly 200 miles from the eye, in every direction.

The greatest damage from the storm was expected from the storm surge along the coastline, and from torrential rains over much of inland South Carolina and North Carolina, which could top 30 inches in some locations. Because the storm's speed was slowing, as it was blocked from moving either north or west by high-pressure systems over the US Northeast and

Midwest, it was forecast that it would essentially stay in place for 24 to 48 hours, dumping water on the coastal and Appalachian foothill regions of the two states.

The National Hurricane Center warned that "life-threatening, catastrophic flash flooding and prolonged significant river flooding are likely over portions of the Carolinas and the southern and central Appalachians late this week into early next week." High winds would also batter the same region for a much longer time than normal for a hurricane, adding to the likely damage and death toll. A tornado alert for eastern and central North Carolina was issued for Friday.

Florence's trajectory is quite unusual for an Atlantic hurricane. The last Category 4 storm to come out of the Atlantic and strike the North Carolina coast head-on was Hazel in 1954, the most destructive previous event in that region.

Storm-driven waters overtopped roadways along the Outer Banks, the barrier islands that separate North Carolina's Pamlico Sound and Albemarle Sound from the Atlantic Ocean. North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper and local officials ordered a mandatory evacuation for both residents and tourists in Dare and Hyde counties, which include all the barrier islands and their access roadways.

As in every significant natural disaster, Hurricane Florence is providing a test of the capacity and resilience, not just of wood, stone and steel structures, but of the structure of the society. On that score, American capitalism has already shown its inability to address basic social needs.

Federal, state and local emergency services are underfunded and overstrained, particularly after the devastating impact of three massive hurricanes in

2017—Harvey, Irma and Maria— which laid waste to parts of Texas and Florida, and the entire island of Puerto Rico. Tens of thousands in Texas have entered a new hurricane season while still displaced from their homes. In Puerto Rico, electrical power was finally restored last month to the last locations on the island nearly a year after the devastation caused by Irma and Maria.

The number of people in the Carolinas covered by federal flood insurance has actually declined over the last five years, despite a wave of panic buying after last year's storms. According to a report in the *Wall Street Journal*, the main reason for the decline was the skyrocketing cost of the insurance, which is provided through the federal government.

Hundreds of thousands of people have been unable to leave their homes after emergency evacuation orders were issued for much of the South Carolina and North Carolina coast. Most of those “choosing” to ride out the storm were actually unwilling economic conscripts in the battle with nature—they could not leave because of poverty, health problems, lack of transportation, or some combination of all three.

The official evacuation orders amount to a washing of hands by government officials of any responsibility for the fate of those left behind, since public emergency services will not be available in the zones where evacuation is declared “mandatory.”

The most abject declaration of irresponsibility came from President Trump, who chose to treat the impending disaster in the Carolinas as an opportunity to deliver nasty tweets rather than federal assistance. He spent the hours leading up to the landfall of Hurricane Florence denouncing the report, issued late last month by George Washington University at the request of the government of Puerto Rico, which placed the death toll from Hurricane Maria at 2,975, rather than the ludicrous initial figure of 64.

The implied message from Trump's tweets is that the White House will ignore or dismiss any reports of mass casualties from Hurricane Florence, or seek to blame any disaster on state or local officials rather than the “commander-in-chief.”

The hurricane also exposed the unpreparedness and incompetence of the huge corporations that monopolize electricity distribution. Duke Energy estimated that as many as three million customers could lose power in

the Carolinas as a result of Florence. Even before the storm hit, David Fountain, president of Duke Energy North Carolina, the state subsidiary of the power giant, was making excuses. “This is no ordinary storm, and people could be without power for a very long time,” he declared. “Not days but weeks. We won't even be able to get to some areas for several days.”

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