

“Unimaginable” death toll predicted in Bahamas after Hurricane Dorian

By Dan Conway
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Five days have now passed since Hurricane Dorian struck the Bahamas with injury and death estimates continuing to grow and the widespread nature of damage becoming clearer. The official death toll rose to 30 Friday but is expected to rise dramatically as recovery efforts continue on the island chain off the southeast coast of Florida.

As of Friday afternoon, more than 6,700 people were listed as missing. Total property damage due to the storm stands at more than \$8 billion with that number expected to rise.

Rescue workers reported that the odor of dead bodies was obvious in numerous locations as temperatures continued to soar. Bahamas health minister Duane Sands warned Friday that, “The public needs to prepare for unimaginable information about the death toll and the human suffering.” Caroline Burnett-Garraway, medical chief of staff at Princess Margaret Hospital in Nassau, noted bluntly, “We’ve ordered lots of body bags.”

While wealthy tourists and property owners were easily able to escape the storm’s path, more than 70,000 on the island now report being in immediate need of aid. This is out of the country’s total population of slightly more than 400,000, meaning that nearly one fifth of Bahamians are in desperate need of assistance.

With winds at one point surpassing 185 miles (295 kilometers) per hour combined with gusts in excess of 220 miles per hour, Dorian reached category 5 status before making landfall in the Bahamas on September 1. Category 5 is the most severe category a hurricane can reach, and the storm spent more than 38 hours over Grand Bahama after the collapse of a high-pressure front steering the storm westwards.

Meteorologists note that there is no comparable instance in recorded history of wind and rain of such intensity and duration combined in a single location. In fact, 13,000 homes and buildings were totally and completely obliterated by the storm with many areas looking like they had been devastated by a nuclear blast. Residents reported 25-foot storm surges that swamped homes into their second stories.

While Dorian was and is an exceptionally severe weather event, the most significant contributing factor to damage and loss of life was the immense growth of poverty throughout the Caribbean island chain.

A 2013 government report noted in particular the widespread growth of shanty towns, many of which have now been completely destroyed by the hurricane. The report noted that the towns were “overcrowded with illegal/poorly constructed dwellings, improper or no sewage disposal systems, compounded with derelict vehicles and garbage accumulation.” The report continued, “All buildings in these shanty towns are made from discarded wood or metals. Construction was ongoing in most of these towns.”

At the same time, the Bahamas, well-known for its tourism industry, recorded its best year ever in 2018 with 6.6 million visitors arriving. According to government figures, tourists spent an average of \$1,500 per visit making tourism a \$9.9 billion-dollar industry that year.

A significant number of multimillionaires and billionaires also either reside permanently or have legal residential status in the country not only due to favorable weather but also a favorable financial environment which exempts the collection of income, capital gains and inheritance taxes. As such, it is one of the top three centers in the world for offshore banking.

Anyone who invests \$500,000 or more in property in the country is eligible for permanent residential status. Some of the ultrawealthy with residences on the island include Bill Gates, women’s fashion billionaire Peter Nygard and British billionaire and financier Joseph Lewis.

While thousands of shanty buildings were destroyed, many of the opulent dwellings owned by this social layer in oceanfront communities such as Lyford Cay, where home listings range from \$4 million to \$40 million, remain completely intact. For those of the ultrawealthy present during the course of the storm, evacuation was barely an inconvenience.

For tens of thousands of Bahamian workers, however, including many Haitians on the island previously made refugees by the 2010 earthquake along with a series of US-backed coups throughout the 1990s and 2000s, no flights or boats were available. For the crime of being poor, they have instead been made to suffer disease and death.

More than half of the roads on the islands most affected by the storm still remain flooded with many areas still only accessible by water or air. The vast majority of the islands are without power, while an estimated 50,000 people lack access to

potable water.

Relief groups have been attempting to move medical personnel and supplies into the hardest hit areas in order to help survivors obtain food, safe drinking water and urgently needed medical care. These efforts are a race against the clock especially with the severe risk of waterborne diseases and sewage contamination. Only one public hospital—Princess Margaret in Nassau, which is a significant distance away from the hardest hit areas—remains operational.

In response to the crisis which has assumed almost biblical proportions, the United Nations announced that it would be purchasing up to eight tons of nonperishable, ready-to-eat meals along with satellite communications equipment, airlift storage units, generators and prefabricated office buildings to coordinate aid operations. Limited, and one-time aid has also been provided by some cruise and airlines that typically bring tourists to and from the country.

Aid organizations report delays of several hours and longer from Nassau airport with the price of helicopter charters rising by nearly 1000 percent after the storm from \$1,000 per trip to \$10,000 per trip. In fact, many runways at Freeport airport, which had been completely flooded by the storm, remain underwater. Harbors throughout the area are littered with debris making anchorage oftentimes impossible.

Although the Bahamas lies just 50 miles off the coast of Florida, aid operations from the US government have thus far been almost nonexistent. A significant factor in this has been the repurposing of disaster relief funding for border security and the building of Trump's US-Mexico border wall which received the full backing of congressional Democrats.

The US political establishment is in fact far more concerned about blocking possible Chinese aid efforts, which current and former officials allege could be used by the latter to form a military and economic beachhead against the US.

In an interview with Axios, former senior director at the National Security Council Fernando Cutz laid out such concerns. "There are certainly concerns about the Chinese having full access to the region," he said. "You could imagine a situation where they would develop intelligence capabilities, intelligence gathering capabilities. And, of course, they could one day have a base, a naval base or some sort of Chinese military base, that close to our shore that would pose a very significant national security issue for the United States."

As in all such responses to wide scale disasters, the US government's response is predicated, first and foremost, not on humanitarian relief but on quelling civil unrest and using the aftermath of the disaster to its advantage at the expense of its global rivals. As such, the Trump administration's disaster relief efforts in the Bahamas have consisted entirely of mass deployments of coast guard and national guard troops.

After departing the Bahamas, Dorian made landfall on the US Coast Thursday, causing significant damage to the coastal areas of the Carolinas and Virginia. Rainfall due to the storm

exceeded 3 inches per hour. Four deaths in the US Southeast have thus far been attributed to the storm while 350,000 remain without power.

To cite only one example, on Ocracoke Island in the Outer Banks off the coast of North Carolina, residents reported climbing into their attics to flee incoming floodwaters caused by storm surges which rose 5 to 7 feet within the course of half an hour. Hundreds of people remain trapped on the island which even in calm weather is only accessible by boat or air. "The wall of water just came rushing through the island from the sound side," said 19-year Ocracoke resident Steve Harris. "We went from no water to 4 to 6 feet in a matter of minutes."

Despite the fact that Dorian had lost power and was classified as a category 2 storm by the time it reached the US coast, it was still powerful enough to generate waterspouts, waterborne tornadoes, one of which almost completely destroyed the Emerald Isle RV park northeast of the city of Wilmington. Photographs from the area show several of the RVs and motor homes completely flipped upside down as a result of the spouts.

Ronnie Watson, owner of the nearby Holiday Trav-L-Park, described the impact of the event to local news media. "My grandson and daughter were screaming, 'Tornado! Tornado!' I looked up and saw it coming. So we ran into the bathroom. It sounded like a locomotive."

According to the latest weather reports, Dorian is projected to make landfall again near Halifax, Nova Scotia as a Category 2 hurricane and head east into the Atlantic Ocean where it will lose strength. The aftermath of the storm will still be dealt with, however, in the weeks, months and years to come.

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