

Trump blocks refugees from Bahamas as humanitarian catastrophe unfolds

10 September 2019

Hurricane Dorian unleashed its wrath on the Bahamas beginning on September 1. More than a week later, the picture emerging in its wake is one of unfathomable destruction. The official Bahamian death toll stood at 44 as of Monday, but government officials have warned that this number will rise dramatically. Eyewitnesses suspect the number will climb to the hundreds or even thousands.

As always with such disasters, the natural component—one of the largest hurricanes on record, fueled by global warming—intersected with social inequality and political indifference on the part of the ruling elites.

Speaking outside the White House Monday, President Trump bared his contempt for the Bahamian people seeking refuge in the US, which differs little from his attitude towards Central American refugees and immigrants from Mexico

“I don’t want to allow people that weren’t supposed to be in the Bahamas to go to the United States,” he said, “including some very bad people and some very bad gang members and some very, very bad drug dealers. So, we are going to be very, very strong on that.”

Such is the response of the American ruling class to the disaster only 50 miles off the coast of Florida.

Trump’s rant follows an incident late Sunday involving a commercial ferry set to travel from hurricane-ravaged Freeport to Fort Lauderdale. A voice over the intercom announced, “All passengers who don’t have US visas please proceed to disembark.” More than a hundred passengers, including children, left the ferry confused and frustrated. In many cases, they had been waiting almost a week to evacuate and had been told they did not need a visa.

US Customs and Border Patrol insisted it was the ferry operator, and not some US government agency,

that had ordered the passengers to disembark. Whatever the source of confusion, the incident is emblematic of the indifference which Dorian survivors face.

Seventy thousand people are homeless of the archipelago nation’s 390,000 residents. The Grand Bahama and Abaco islands were the worst hit by the Category 5 storm with 220 mile per hour winds and a 30-foot storm surge that wracked the islands for at least two days.

Search and rescue teams with cadaver dogs are attempting to rummage through rubble on the Abacos, putting whatever human remains they find into body bags and coolers. In Marsh Harbour, the Abacos’ biggest town and one of the hardest hit, morticians at a makeshift mortuary told CNN the difficulty reaching bodies was slowing their work.

The shantytowns of Marsh Harbour were some of the worst hit in the Abacos. Many Bahamians fear that the highest numbers of dead will be found there. The Bahamas boasts some of the most stringent building codes in the Caribbean. These communities, however, are mostly inhabited by Haitian immigrants, many of them undocumented, who have constructed their homes by hand with plywood and two-by-fours.

Doctors are warning that a health crisis could erupt, especially on Abaco, where toxic waters sit atop one of the Marsh Harbour neighborhoods. Poorly built homes used outhouses for toilets and have now been ravaged along with the rest of the community.

Reporters have been shown bodies pinned under debris, rotting in the open, or lying swollen in pools of water. But for many, their loved ones are still missing and unaccounted for. McAdrian Farrington of Murphy Town, west of Marsh Harbour, appeared on television broadcasts last week telling of how his five-year-old son was taken away by the floodwaters after he had placed him on the roof of his home in hopes of keeping

him safe. His son still has not been found.

Thousands of people continue to pour into the capital, Nassau, where storm shelters are straining to house evacuees from the worst-hit areas. A woman who had evacuated to Nassau told CNN, “There are dead animals and gasoline in the water.” She said, “The clinic was so bad the toilet bowls were overflowing. The sewers are coming up ... bodies are in the harbor.”

Over the weekend, nearly 1,500 evacuees arrived in Palm Beach, Florida, where they were vetted by immigration authorities. For those evacuated to Nassau who have no money and no passports or other documentation, there is no possibility at this point of evacuating to the US.

Bahamian Prime Minister Hubert Minnis told a press conference last week, “We are in the midst of one of the greatest national crises in our country’s history.” He said, “No effort or resources will be held back.” But the people are becoming increasingly frustrated at the slow pace of recovery and evacuation operations.

As in all such tragedies, it is the poorest and most vulnerable in society who stand to lose and suffer the most. As of 2017 in the Bahamas, nearly 15 percent of the population lived below the poverty line, growing by 2 percent since 2014. Haitian nationals have the highest poverty rate, at more than 37 percent.

Bahamian households living below the \$5,000 poverty line increased by 83 percent between 2007 and 2011 due to the recession. Children under 14 suffer the highest poverty rates, as do households with seven or more members.

The Bahamas has no income tax, corporate tax, capital gains tax, or wealth tax, making the nation ideal for business and exploitation. A 1955 agreement established a duty-free zone in Freeport, with a nearby industrial park to encourage foreign industrial investment. Legislation in 1993 extended most Freeport tax and duty exemptions through 2054.

After tourism, financial services constitute the second most important sector of the Bahamian economy, due to the country’s status as an offshore financial haven. Hundreds of banks and trust companies have been licensed there.

While bankers and investors plunder the economy, a socially regressive Value Added Tax (VAT) of 7.5 percent was levied in 2015 and increased to 12 percent effective in July 2018, targeting workers and the poor,

including those now most impacted by Dorian.

Natural disasters of the past decade point to a pattern of purposeful neglect of the US government in particular in response to such tragedies:

August 29, 2005: Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans, Louisiana, as a Category 3 hurricane, killing thousands and displacing many thousands more.

January 12, 2010: A magnitude 7 earthquake hit Haiti, affecting an estimated 3 million people and killing untold hundreds of thousands.

September 20, 2017: Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico as a Category 4 hurricane. Although it claimed more than 3,000 lives, the Trump administration has continually refused to accept this death count.

To this day, countless thousands of people in Haiti and Puerto Rico are still living under tarps in squalid conditions, and there is no reason to believe this will not be the case in the Bahamas in 10 years’ time. While climate scientists concur that there is no question global warming has created the conditions for ever-more powerful weather events, nothing is done to prepare for them.

This is above all due to the subordination of all aspects of social life—from the well-being of the population, to the protection of the health of the planet, to the dispatch of humanitarian aid in the face of natural disasters—to the capitalist profit system.

Kate Randall

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