

Reservoir Breaches in Houston Threaten More Death and Destruction

As Trump gloats over “success” of government response to Hurricane Harvey

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The Hurricane Harvey catastrophe deepened as a pair of 70-year-old reservoir dams began overflowing on Tuesday, adding to the rising floodwaters from the storm that have crippled the area after five consecutive days of rain. A new US record of rainfall for a tropical system has been set, measuring 51-plus inches.

President Trump visited Texas on Tuesday as the floodwaters continued to ravage the Houston metropolitan area and southeast regions of the state, in what the National Weather Service deemed an “unprecedented” event. The storm is expected to make a third landfall on the Texas/Louisiana border in the coming days.

An active rescue operation was still underway as the president and Melania Trump touched down in Corpus Christi, outside the area hard-hit by the storm. They headed to a local fire station where they were briefed on relief efforts by Republican Governor Greg Abbott, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Administrator Brock Long, Texas Senators Ted Cruz and John Cornyn, and others.



Texas National Guard soldiers deploy in flooded areas around Houston, Texas 27 August, 2017. (Photo by 1Lt. Zachary West, 100th MPAD)

While floodwaters continued to rise in nearby Houston, and stranded residents were still waiting for rescue by boat or helicopter, the atmosphere at the briefing was astonishingly complacent, taking on the air of Texas good old boys patting themselves on the back. Abbott, a longtime Trump supporter, traded praises with the president for the wonderful work they were doing. And Trump similarly complimented FEMA and the Coast Guard for their rescue work.

“We won’t say congratulations. We don’t wanna do that,” Trump said. “We don’t wanna congratulate. We’ll congratulate each other when it’s all finished, but you have been terrific.” The surreal nature of this gathering of the political establishment could aptly be summed up by the phrase: “Trump gloats, while Houston floats.”

Trump held a rally outside the firehouse that had the feel of a campaign stump speech, waving the Texas Lone Star flag, describing the storm as “epic,” and insuring the crowd that Texas would persevere.

About 200 miles northeast of Corpus Christi, in the Houston area, the disaster wrought by Harvey’s wrath continued to unfold. The two dams that began overflowing threatened downtown Houston. A levee at Columbia Lakes south of Houston was also breached, and Brazoria County authorities posted a message on Twitter telling people to “GET OUT NOW!!!”

On Monday, engineers had begun releasing water from the Addicks and Barker reservoirs, which are at record highs, to ease the strain on them, but it was not enough. The release of the water means that even more homes and streets will flood, and authorities said that some homes could be flooded for up to a month.

Authorities are still in “rescue” mode. More than 3,000 national and state guard troops have been deployed to assist in the rescue mission, and the Pentagon has said 30,000 National Guard troops could be mobilized. The Coast Guard has made an estimated 4,000 rescues, but there is no official count of those rescued by the hundreds of volunteers with canoes, paddleboards and other flat-bottom boats who have sprung into action to save their neighbors and strangers.



Texas National Guard soldiers in heavily flooded areas from the storms of Hurricane Harvey. (Photos by Lt. Zachary West , 100th MPAD)

The official death toll stands at 30. But as the tragedy of Katrina showed, the full extent of fatalities will not be known until the floodwaters clear, which may be weeks or months. The Saldoval family of Houston reported the fate of six of their family members, including four children, who are feared dead after their van was swept away by floodwaters while crossing a bridge attempting to escape.

There is no way to know how many victims lie in their vehicles submerged underwater, or in their flooded homes. While the Houston authorities reported receiving as many as 1,000 emergency calls an hour for rescue as of Tuesday, there is no official tally of how many people may still be trapped in houses and mobile homes, attempting to survive for days without power, clean water and food. Numerous tragedies like that of the Saldoval family are likely to emerge in the coming days and weeks.

Houston authorities have estimated that 17,000 evacuees will be seeking emergency shelter. Already the George R. Brown Convention Center, which is supposed to shelter 5,000 people, is holding more than 10,000 people. FEMA head Long's assurances that the center would not become "another Superdome"—referring to the New Orleans sports stadium that housed evacuees in deplorable conditions in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005—cannot be taken as good coin when the convention center is packed at double capacity.

Hurricane Harvey portends a public health crisis as well. Medical staff have been trapped in hospitals with dwindling supplies of food and medicine, forcing more health care facilities to close and evacuate patients by boat. Memorial Sugar Land Hospital has had to evacuate patients temporarily.



An estimated 17,000 people have been evacuated. (Photos by Lt. Zachary West , 100th MPAD)

The *Houston Chronicle* reports that Ben Taub Hospital has resumed plans to transfer its most critical patients to other facilities, road conditions permitting. The biggest risk is running out of supplies, including medicine, due to high water limiting access to the facility. The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center cancelled outpatient services, appointments and surgeries through Tuesday.

The floodwaters not only displace people, but pose significant risks to health and safety. They can be full of contaminants.

“Flood water mixes with everything below it,” Dr. Richard Bradley, chief of the division of emergency medical services at McGovern Medical School at the University of Texas Science Center at Houston, told Time magazine.

“If it covers a field with pesticides, it picks up the pesticides. It can also carry animal waste from fields and forests.”

While the public focuses on the rescue, safety and health of their loved ones, Houston’s police chief Art Acevedo made a threat against any would-be looters, saying that armed robbers had been apprehended Tuesday and taken into custody. Acevedo said he had spoken with the Harris County district attorney’s office to lobby that anyone suspected of looting be prosecuted and given the most severe punishment allowed by Texas law. The allegations of “looting” were used to justify a law-and-order crackdown by police and military personnel during Hurricane Katrina.

Later Tuesday at the Texas Emergency Command Center in Austin, the president met with FEMA along with Texas and Trump administration officials. Among them was Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Tom Price, who explained that HHS’s responsibility in the crisis was to attend to public health, veterinary and mortuary services, making a grim allusion to the work of recovering and burying the expected casualties.

Ben Carson, secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), said his department's role would be to insure loan guarantees for infrastructure recovery, to provide immediate foreclosure relief and mortgage insurance. He also said a key role for HUD was to disseminate information, as "the masses frequently become confused" in such situations.

The reality is that "the masses" are not confused, but infuriated under such situations when they find out they are not covered by insurance, or that their insurance is basically worthless. Only one in six Texans have flood insurance. And even for those who do have insurance, it doesn't cover a flood caused by "Mother Nature," such as a hurricane. Only a federal program covers flood disasters, and this program runs out at the end of September unless it is reauthorized by Congress.

Five years after Superstorm Sandy hit the Northeast US, some 80 percent of homeowners have not received compensation from their insurers for flood damage.

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