

1,000 missing, at least 66 dead, as Hurricane Helene devastates southern Appalachia

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The death toll from Hurricane Helene stands at 66 dead across five states. This number is certain to rise as the wind and flood waters from Florida to Ohio begin to recede over the coming days, and more bodies are found.

Ten people are confirmed dead in Buncombe County, North Carolina, where the city of Asheville, the largest in the region, is located. “We have biblical devastation throughout the county,” said Ryan Cole, an emergency official for Buncombe County. “This is the most significant natural disaster that any one of us has ever seen.”

At least 1,000 people are reported missing in the southern Appalachian areas of western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee after the giant storm dumped upwards of three feet of rain on the region.

There are at least 11 reported deaths in Florida as of Saturday, with 17 dead in Georgia and another 23 in South Carolina. One death was reported in Virginia.

As much of the affected area in the state is impassable due to flooding and mudslides and hundreds or thousands are without power and communications, this number is sure to rise precipitously in the coming days as recovery continues.

Already social media is filling with pictures of loved ones who are missing, many of whom were known to be fleeing ahead of massive torrents of flood water plummeting down the steep slopes of the Smoky Mountains and the Blue Ridge Mountains into the valleys below.

The first Category 4 hurricane to land in Florida’s Big Bend Region brought record storm surges, in some cases, such as in Tampa Bay, breaking the record set by Hurricane Idalia only 13 months ago.

The storm quickly intensified over the Gulf of Mexico on Thursday from a Category 1 storm to a massive Category 4 storm in less than 24 hours before slamming into Florida and then hurtling northward into Georgia, the Carolinas and Tennessee.

The rapid strengthening of Helene and the huge volumes of water it swept up and then dropped like a series of bombs on countryside far from the Gulf of Mexico were entirely predictable, given the analysis of climate change made by countless scientific and meteorological studies. Yet nothing has been done to prepare ahead of time.

While capitalist politicians murmured insincere condolences and offered prayers for the dead and missing, and the White House announced that President Joe Biden would visit the storm-ravaged region, residents of Asheville and many other hard-hit area told the corporate media they had received no aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and little from state authorities.

Socialist Equality Party candidate for US president Joseph Kishore issued a statement condemning what he termed “the gross negligence

of both the Democratic and Republican parties in the face of the catastrophic devastation caused by Hurricane Helene.”

The destruction wrought by Hurricane Helene is not simply the result of a natural disaster but of a decades-long failure by the ruling class to provide for the most basic social needs. Emergency warning systems were inadequate, and there was no coordinated plan for mass evacuations. Roads, bridges, dams and levees—basic components of social infrastructure—are crumbling from decades of neglect. This left many communities vulnerable to the full force of the storm, with little in the way of protection.

The absence of an adequate emergency response is not accidental but the result of the subordination of all social needs to the interests of the wealthy. For decades, both Democratic and Republican administrations have systematically cut funding for disaster preparedness, infrastructure, and public services, while funneling trillions of dollars into war and bailing out the banks.

Under these conditions, millions of working people are left to fend for themselves in the face of disasters like Hurricane Helene.

The devastation

On Friday, North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper closed all roads in the western part of the state. Currently, over 400 roads remain closed. The Tennessee Department of Transportation is warning motorists to avoid travel in the area as all roads are considered hazardous.

The devastation to the transportation system in the region alone is immense.

? A large section of eastbound Interstate 40, the only major transportation artery through the Smoky Mountains connecting Tennessee to North Carolina, collapsed into the Pigeon River close to the Tennessee/North Carolina border.

? US Route 74, the North Carolina highway that connects the cities of Asheville, Charlotte and Wilmington to the Atlantic seaboard, is completely inundated by flood water.

? Interstate 26 is washed out at Exit 40 on the border between North Carolina and Erwin, Tennessee.

? In Tennessee, a video captured the moment the Kisner Bridge on

Highway 107 in the town of Afton succumbed to the racing waters of the Nolichucky River.

Airlift operations are underway to rescue residents cut off by the flooding and damage to secondary and tertiary roads.

? In Tennessee, 54 people were rescued from the roof of Unicoi County Hospital as the town was quickly overcome by the flood waters from the Nolichucky River.

? Supplies are being airlifted into Asheville, North Carolina, which has been isolated by flood and storm damage from Helene. The city's historic Biltmore Village was inundated by flood waters. Residents took refuge on rooftops to escape the rising waters of the French Broad and Swannanoa rivers.

Power, communications and water systems infrastructure have been decimated by wind, mudslides and flooding. More than 700,000 in the region are without power, and cell phone service west of Interstate 77 is poor to nonexistent, according to local media.

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which manages river systems in Tennessee and parts of North Carolina, estimates water levels reached 8 feet over the record elevation. While the walls of both dams managed to withstand the immense pressure of the rising water, the extent of the damage to the structures is just emerging.

Early Sunday afternoon, Laura White, superintendent of the Greeneville Water Commission, announced that Greene County residents could run out of water by the end of the day. According to officials, two intakes with four pumps on the Nolichucky River, from which water for the area is being pumped out, were submerged and destroyed by massive flooding.

According to CNN, seven water plants across North Carolina are closed, and 17 water plants reported having no power, impacting at least 70,000 households.

Chief meteorologist of AccuWeather Jonathan Porter told Reuters that damage estimates for Helene could be between \$95 billion to \$110 billion, making it one of the costliest storms in US history.

Where were the warnings?

According to a study by the American Meteorological Society, the southern Appalachian Mountains is one of six flash flood "hotspots" in the United States. The area's steep terrain, combined with heavy rains fed by the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean, make flooding a persistent danger.

In the last 10 years, 230 people have died in nearly 20 federally declared flooding disasters in Appalachia, the Appalachian Citizens' Law Center reported last May.

The Blue Ridge and Smoky Mountains, where Helene hit, have been experiencing persistent drought conditions since 2022, according to Drought.gov. Counties in the areas most affected by the tropical storm were designated "abnormally dry" by the U.S. Drought Monitor.

Under "normal" storm conditions, heavy rain in this terrain would cause mudslides and flash flooding due to loose soil and weakened vegetation from a drought.

Hurricane Helene was another matter entirely. Brian McNoldy, a climatologist at the University of Miami who tracks ocean heat, told Vox the Gulf of Mexico is the hottest it has been in the modern

record with surface temperatures close to 90 degrees.

While it is almost common knowledge that warm surface temperatures of ocean waters fuel hurricanes, what caused Helene to intensify from a Category 1 to a Category 4 hurricane in less than 24 hours on Thursday was the warm water beneath the surface.

Ben Kirtman, director of the Cooperative Institute for Marine and Atmospheric Studies, told Vox when the water is warm even below the surface the hurricane's winds can increase 35 miles per hour or more in less than 24 hours as happened with Helene.

Additionally, the warmer atmosphere caused by climate change can hold up to 7 percent more moisture. This is why rainfall rates of hurricanes have been increasing, Tom Knutson, a senior scientist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Lab, explained to the Hill.

Forecasts for the Blue Ridge and Smoky Mountains on Thursday, while dire, warned residents to expect rainfalls far below what actually fell. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park forecasted 4-5 inches of rain on the Tennessee side of the park and 6-9 inches on the North Carolina side through Friday.

According to local news outlets, a record 17.3 inches fell on Asheville, 24 inches fell in Mitchell County, northeast of the city. Yancey County, also north of Asheville, received 30 inches of rain.

The question remains, given the rapid intensification of rain-laden Helene and drought conditions in the region, why was there not more of an effort to evacuate people in western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee before the storm moved in on Friday?

Climate change in the US, as elsewhere, is driven by human activity and an economic system which prioritizes profit over environmental sustainability and human welfare. Despite the increasingly visible effects of climate change, capitalist governments are failing to take adequate steps to mitigate these long-foreseen disasters.

Instead of investing in environmental protection and disaster management, the US has diverted vast sums to the military to fund its imperialist missions in Russia, China and the Middle East.



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