

As the death toll from Hurricane Helene climbs past 200, Trump, Harris and Biden campaign among the ruins

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The death toll from Hurricane Helene surpassed 200 Thursday as search and rescue teams made their way further into the broken mountain terrain of western North Carolina and Tennessee. According to the Associated Press, half of the storm's victims are from North Carolina while dozens died in South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

This makes Helene the second deadliest storm to hit the continental United States since Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The number of dead is expected to rise as hundreds of people are still unaccounted for nearly a week after the onslaught.

Helene dropped 42 trillion gallons of rain on the Southeast. At 420 miles wide, Helene is the third largest Hurricane to hit the Gulf Coast. Fueled by the extremely warm waters in the Gulf of Mexico, the storm rapidly grew to a Category 4 storm before it made landfall as a consequence of climate change.

Accuweather revised its initial estimate of the storm damage from \$145 billion to \$160 billion on Tuesday. According to Bloomberg, this will put Helene in the top five of the US's costliest hurricanes.

On Thursday, as President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris posed this week in Georgia for the cameras amid the devastation, the White House published a press release boasting, "Biden-Harris Administration Provides More Than \$20 Million to Hurricane Helene Survivors."

It does not require close reading of the document to realize the Biden administration did not cough up another \$20 million dollars, a paltry sum given the magnitude of the devastation, for the survivors of Helene.

The \$20 million is from the Federal Emergency

Management Agency (FEMA), and the "flexible, upfront funding" boasted about in the first paragraph of the release indicates it is money coming from FEMA's budget, specifically from its Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) which was reformed in March 2024 to provide "flexible funding" directly to survivors during a crisis.

The fact is, Congress cut FEMA's request for supplemental funding when it passed a stop-gap budget bill before it left for a six-week break on Wednesday, September 26. According to a report from Politico, FEMA's disaster relief fund is facing a \$2 billion deficit by the end of September.

Former President Donald Trump made his own campaign stop in Valdosta, Georgia, this week on Monday where he postured about the limited federal response and posed in front of aid provided by Samaritan's Purse, a nonprofit organization run by evangelist Franklin Graham.

When he was president, Trump oversaw the disastrous response to Hurricane Maria in the US territory of Puerto Rico, which resulted in nearly 3,000 deaths in 2017. Trump infamously tossed paper towels to a crowd during a photo-op, expressing his disdain for the population of the impoverished island.

Meanwhile, every day across the Southeast the historic extent of the devastation and its consequences is being revealed.

As flood waters steadily recede in Tennessee and Western North Carolina, the excess water is taxing the Tennessee Valley Authority's (TVA) dam and reservoir system downstream.

Currently, TVA is spilling water from eight of nine dams on the Tennessee River until further notice. Water levels in some reservoirs reached their highest historic

levels during Helene.

Cities along the river, like Knoxville, Tennessee, were under a flood warning until Tuesday due to the amount of water moving through the system, causing high water on lakes and rivers downstream.

The dam on Douglas Lake has been of particular concern to authorities due to high levels of runoff from the French Broad River filling the reservoir. The French Broad is responsible for catastrophic damage, including the washout of the eastbound lanes of Interstate 40 in North Carolina near Tennessee.

The TVA announced on Thursday it is placing a one-mile boom across Douglas Lake to manage the massive amount of debris flowing downstream into the dam until it can be removed.

Nearly one million people are still without power in Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas. Hundreds of thousands are without water after flood waters carried away water system infrastructures. Cell phone service is slowly being reestablished, but is still spotty throughout western North Carolina.

Google Maps posted a notice on Wednesday that Interstate 40 on the Tennessee to North Carolina border would reopen in September 2025; however, Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) spokesman Mark Nagi told local news there is yet no timeframe for the road's reopening.

Interstate 26 and Interstate 40 are critical routes for shipping, both west to east and north to south, Donald Maier, an associate professor of practice at the University of Tennessee's supply chain program, told WBIR in Knoxville.

Maier anticipates that the road closures will affect inventory levels at grocery stores and bulk shipments, such as lumber, as truckers would have to cover longer distances to transport goods between eastern and western areas.

He also warned that the prices on consumer goods might increase by as much as 20 percent in the short term due to longer truck routes, and perhaps up to 40 percent as the effects of the dockworkers strike begins to be felt.



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