

As fires continue to burn, Los Angeles residents face toxic smoke, mudslides and astronomical housing costs

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In a Thursday morning press conference, Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna announced that two more people have died from the Eaton and Palisades fires. This brings the death toll to at least 27, with another 31 people officially missing.

As of this writing, the larger Palisades Fire remains only 22 percent contained, while the Eaton Fire is at 55 percent. Santa Ana winds, which have fueled both fires, receded on Thursday providing firefighting crews, including helicopters, windows of opportunity to try and contain the infernos. However, Luna said it would be another week, if not longer, until the over 80,000 residents who are still displaced would be allowed to return.

Even with the slight respite from the winds, millions of people are in danger from toxic chemicals and plastics that continue to burn throughout urban areas. Dr. Jeff Masters, a former hurricane scientist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), wrote in a recent article for Yale Climate Connections that the “eventual death toll from the disaster is likely to be far, far, higher, once the health effects from the toxic smoke from the fires are fully realized.”

Masters cited several recent studies on wildfire smoke, including a 2024 study which found that smoke from the 2018 Paradise Fire may have killed as many as “12,000 Californians prematurely.” While burning trees release gases such as carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide, modern homes and urban landscapes are filled with plastics, which burn faster and release more toxic chemicals.

Speaking to the *Atlantic*, Cal Fire Battalion Chief David Acuña admitted “we can’t put firefighters in

front of these houses” due to the toxic air released from the burning of petrochemicals inside. Acuña noted that while plastic is a useful material, “it will burn faster, and it will burn hotter.”

In addition to still raging fires, toxic smoke, downed power lines and ruptured gas lines, residents whose homes may have been spared from the flames are now having to contend with potentially deadly mudslides and erosion, with steep hillsides now stripped of vegetation. At least one home in Pacific Palisades that was not burned is now unlivable after it was practically split in half once the ground underneath it gave way due to the shifting of soil between the fires and runoff.

Los Angeles County Department of Public Works Director Mark Pestrella warned in a Thursday press conference that more homes could be at risk from mudslides if, and when, major rainfall occurs. He noted that debris from burned out houses and foliage could overwhelm the flood control system. He said that “in an event that we have major rain, we do expect that all areas will be impacted by debris flows that will be hazardous to human health.”

The fires have destroyed thousands of homes, leaving tens of thousands of residents without permanent shelter. According to residential real estate brokerage firm Redfin, as of December 2024 the median home sale price in Los Angeles was over \$905,000, with an average monthly mortgage payment of \$5,970. Los Angeles, Redfin wrote, “has the least affordable for-sale housing market in the country.” As for renters, Redfin found that the median asking rental price for December 2024 was \$2,780, over \$1,000 more than the national median asking rent of \$1,594. Before the fires, more than 95 percent of apartment units in the city were

occupied.

Since the fires, residents have reported that many landlords are seeking to take advantage of the recently homeless and displaced. A Google sheet created by Los Angeles resident Chelsea Kirk tabulates over 1,250 properties that have seen dramatic price increases since the fires started last Tuesday.

Kirk told SFGate that she began the spreadsheet after she saw listings in her Echo Park neighborhood dramatically increase in price. While California has a law that bars price increases of 10 percent or more during a state of emergency, Kirk said she saw listings that had increased as much as “120 percent.”

At the Westwood Recreation Center in Los Angeles on Thursday, WSWS reporters spoke to Pauline about the immense difficulty she and thousands of others are currently having trying to secure housing. She said that before the fire started she was under the impression she had secured an AirBnB rental and had already paid a fee to someone she thought had access to the property.

“When I went to my AirBnB, the fire started, I ran, twisted both my ankles, my hands got hurt... It was a complete nightmare.” Pauline has been unable to recoup any of the money she previously paid. “They take your money and leave you nowhere.”

“I want to get an apartment now,” she added, “but no one will rent to me because I’m not working. Now how can I work when I’m in that shelter? I’m really mad, because we all pay taxes, everyone.

“Why won’t they let me have a place? They said I have to have three times their rent money. That’s a lie. That’s a horrible thing to do to someone, or pay a year’s rent before I move in. I should be able to get a place to live.”

She added, “There are other people, and I don’t want anyone ripped off after they’ve lost everything. The woman I was just sitting with there, she was a young girl, they lost her whole house. She showed me the whole house burning, burning, gone. She has nothing.”

Pauline noted that rents have gone up around the city in the days since the fires began last week. “They really have to get after these price gouging things. They never did for food.” She added, “It’s a cost-of-living [crisis]. Who can even afford it? People forget that you’re only one paycheck away from being homeless.”

She said, “People don’t have anything. And they have to depend on their insurance. And God knows if

they’re going to pull out like they did in Florida. My two friends that live there, one of them was hit. She paid \$15,000 a year, and the insurance company said ‘We can’t fix your place.’”

On the Dan Bongino show Thursday, President-elect Donald Trump again raised the possibility of withholding disaster relief to California residents unless they agreed to fund his political priorities, including a massive border police-state bill and tax cuts for the wealthy.

“I’d like to see one bill,” Trump said. “And because of Los Angeles, you’d think that’s a Democrat thing. They want that money going so fast.” He added, “If you add Los Angeles into it, then you can really do one, big, beautiful bill, because, frankly, they want that so badly. They want the money to go out there so badly. And I don’t think we should do a bill until Los Angeles is included. And when Los Angeles is included, we get everything we want.”

Commenting on Trump and the Republican Party’s threats to withhold disaster aid, Pauline said, “He’s insulting the people. He hates Los Angeles because we don’t like him.” Asked to comment on Trump blaming immigrants for starting the fires, Pauline replied, “He is a racist.”



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