

U.S. official says an estimated 600 lost lives from Hurricane Helene

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Tampa, October 1 (RHC)-- The death toll in the wake of Hurricane Helene in the southeastern United States has risen to at least 100, according to authorities, with a senior official saying the there could “be as many as 600 lost lives” as a result of the storm.

Liz Sherwood-Randall, the White House Homeland Security Adviser, gave the grim account during an update on the storm on Monday. “The current data we have is that it looks like there could be as many as 600 lost lives,” she told reporters, adding the administration does not have confirmation of that. “We know there are 600 who are either lost or unaccounted for,” she said.

For his part, U.S. President Joe Biden described the impact of the storm as “stunning”. Speaking to reporters on Monday, he pledged his administration would “continue to surge resources, including food, water, communications and life saving equipment”.

“We will be there with you as long as it takes,” Biden said, while adding that he may have to request a supplemental funding package from the U.S. Congress to support the effort. Biden also announced that he planned to visit North Carolina – one of the hardest hit states – later this week.

Rescue, recovery and cleanup operations were also continuing across hard-hit areas of Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and Tennessee. The most severe damage was brought by flooding and the storm’s heavy rains, which destroyed roads and infrastructure across the region.

Helene had made landfall in Florida on Thursday, when it was a Category Four hurricane with winds of 225 kilometres per hour (140 miles per hour). It weakened as it moved inland but caused a swath of damage stretching more than 804 km (500 miles).

At least 39 people were killed in North Carolina, 25 in South Carolina, 17 in Georgia, 14 in Florida, four in Tennessee and one in Virginia, according to tallies from local authorities. The overall death toll is expected to rise.

One county in North Carolina, Buncombe, had at least 30 deaths, the local sheriff said on Sunday. The county, which includes the hard-hit city of Asheville, is in the Blue Ridge mountains and experienced particularly severe flooding. Search operations were continuing on Monday.

Across the state, North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper said hundreds of roads had been destroyed and many communities “wiped off the map.” “This is an unprecedented storm,” he told reporters. “We’re working to surge supplies in. The emotional and physical toll here is indescribable. “Rivers are still rising, so the danger is not over.”

Nearly two million households and businesses remained without power on Monday, according to tracker poweroutage.us. Climate change experts have warned that warmer sea temperatures are causing increasingly strong storms in the Atlantic, although August and September had proven surprisingly subdued.

The fallout from the storm, which made landfall about a month before the US presidential election, has quickly taken a top role in both the campaigns of Republican candidate, former President Donald Trump, and Democratic candidate, Vice President Kamala Harris.

The affected areas include Georgia and North Carolina, both key states where polls show the race remains tight.

Speaking at a rally on Sunday night in Las Vegas, Nevada, Harris addressed the ravages of the storm. “I know everyone here sends their thoughts and prayers for the folks who have been so devastated by that hurricane,” she said.

“We will stand with these communities for as long as it takes and make sure they are able to rebuild.” Harris’s office later announced that she would head back to Washington, DC earlier than planned. The White House said she and Biden would visit the region this week.

Former President Donald Trump also visited Valdosta, Georgia on Monday to survey Helene's effect. Upon landing he falsely claimed that Biden had been "sleeping" and was not answering calls from Georgia Governor Brian Kemp. The White House and Kemp's office both said Biden and the governor had been in contact.

[Source: Al Jazeera and news agencies]

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