

United States - Hurricane Harvey, Global Warming, Environmental Racism, and Immigrants

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The massive devastation, death and misery hurricane Harvey wreaked upon the Gulf Coast and inland on Texas and Louisiana has been seen throughout the world. The coverage has centered on Houston, the fourth largest city in the U.S., which saw the greatest amount of rain to fall in a few days in the country's history.

The result was massive flooding everywhere in the city and its environs, in much of Texas and western Louisiana, and continuing as Harvey moved north. At least 63 people have now died in the unprecedented flooding. The damage caused by the storm is staggering. More than 40,000 homes have been lost, as many as a million cars destroyed.

The body of Alonso Guillen, a volunteer rescuer, was found September 1. He was also an undocumented immigrant and a recipient of DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (see below). His body was found after he disappeared two days before, when his boat hit a bridge and capsized. His mother told the Houston Chronicle she tried to come from Mexico to the U.S. to bury her son but was turned away by Border Patrol agents. She said, "When we are with God, there are no borders."

What has been studiously avoided in the media has been any discussion of global warming – the elephant in the room. Republican politicians, most of whom are climate change deniers, have of course not raised the issue. But the Democrats, who have talked about it in the past but done nothing substantial to address the problem, are also silent.

The talking heads in the media say now is not the time to inject "politics" into this national disaster by talking about global warming. By this silence they take a political stand with Trump and the rest of the climate change deniers. Among these is ultra-rightist Texas governor Greg Abbott and his whole administration.

Hard on heels of Harvey is another hurricane, Irma, with 185 miles per hour winds one of the most powerful Atlantic storms ever. Global warming? What global warming? It's "just the weather" says Trump.

Global warming caused mainly by the mining, transportation, refining and most of all burning of fossil fuels – has made storms like hurricanes far more powerful and destructive, as massive amounts of scientific data in the last decades has proven.

As the "global" in global warming implies, this is a world-wide threat. A case in point is that contemporaneous with Harvey the seasonal monsoon rains in South Asia have become especially destructive. Torrential rains have caused massive flooding.

According to the UN, at least 41 million people in Bangladesh, India and Nepal have been affected by flooding and landslides. There have been 1,400 deaths reported, a likely low number in the affected areas, with poor infrastructure and government services.

In Bangladesh, one third of the country is under water. Asad Rehman, Executive Director of War on Want, who has worked on climate issues in the region for over a decade said, "I spoke to somebody [recently] in Bangladesh who told me there are still communities cut off.... People without food, without access to fresh water. How could the flooding mean that people don't have access to fresh water? Because the flooding has meant fresh water wells are all polluted."

He noted that the monsoon rains are becoming more intense and devastating. "This is for two reasons. One, as temperatures increase, and we are seeing warming across the globe, the glaciers and the snowmelt are swelling rivers as they come through the Himalayas, through Nepal, India and into Bangladesh, where they go into the sea. At the same time, warming temperatures in the sea means that there's more moisture in the atmosphere, which means more intense and heavier rains.

"Climate scientists have been telling us and have predicted what would be happening. That these kinds of intense storms, which used to happen every few hundred years, would happen much more regularly, every decade, and now have become literally an annual thing.

"A problem is the ability of the people and the government to respond. When you have these floods which wipe away infrastructure, schools, hospitals, roads, it is very hard to rebuild. Flood control systems are overwhelmed.... The ability of these poor countries to be able to continuously rebuild is severely limited. These impacts are not only to be felt today. They're going to be felt in the days, weeks and months after.

"Many of these people are subsistence farmers, people who rely on their crops to both feed their families and to sell some of their crops to be able to survive the year - most of them have lost their crops already."

Rehman points out, "The Ganges Basin is one of the bread baskets, the food baskets of the region. This and the Indus food basket have been severely impacted by climate [change] and are predicted to get even worse."

The floods came weeks after researchers at MIT released a report saying that soaring temperatures could make parts of South Asia with 1.5 billion people too hot for human survival by 2100. In a heat wave in 2015, some 3,500 people died in India and Pakistan. That heat wave reached 49.5 degrees Centigrade (121.4 Fahrenheit), Rehman noted. "Earlier this year in May, Pakistan recorded a temperature level of 51 degrees C."

Global warming brings not only more intense rains and more violent storms, but also more intense heat and droughts, in different areas and sometimes in different seasons in the same area.

It's fashionable to say that hurricanes are local phenomenon, and we can't say that global warming is responsible for things like Harvey. Let's take a closer look at local and global:

Fossil fuels produce the greenhouse gases responsible for global warming. Those gasses spread across the globe. The hurricane that hit Houston was a local phenomenon greatly strengthened by global warming. The production and burning of fossil fuels are likewise local, taking place at specific locations. One of those locations is Houston. The irony is that Houston contributes to warming on a global scale, which in turn produced the extent of the local destruction of Houston.

Houston, the Petro Metro, is home to a quarter of the petroleum refining capacity in the United

States. Including the entire Gulf Coast, that percentage rises to one half. Some of the major refineries in the region are run by ExxonMobil, Valero and the Saudi-owned Motiva. These have the higher capacity needed to refine the very dirty tar sands oil piped in from Canada, as well as similar dirty crude from North Dakota via the Dakota Access Pipeline protested at Standing Rock.

The refineries in Houston were forced to shut down rapidly with Harvey's approach. As a former refinery worker, I know shutdowns and startups of refineries are times of extra release of toxic chemicals, and rapid shutdowns are even much more so.

Houston is also home to many petrochemical plants using products from the refineries. They had no infrastructure or plans to deal with disasters. The flooding wrecked cooling equipment in these plants, which caused many to explode and catch fire, releasing more toxins. These companies have refused to make public what poisons they produce, because, they say, such information could be used by terrorists to bomb these plants and release dangerous toxins. It turns out these terrorists were the companies themselves.

In addition, there were huge leaks from fuel storage tanks.

The Center for Biological Diversity reports flooded oil refineries and chemical plants released as much as 5 million pounds of pollutants into the air during the storm.

While all Houston residents were exposed, it was Black and Latino communities which were hardest hit. Throughout the segregated United States, those living the closest to refineries, chemical plants, garbage disposal plants and other centers of toxic waste are most often minorities.

Dr. Robert Bullard, known as the "father of environmental justice," and a professor at Texas Southern University, said, "When we talk about the impact of sea level rise and the impacts of climate change, you're talking about a disproportionate impact on communities of color, on poor people who don't have health insurance, access to grocery stores.... [It's] not just the loss of housing and jobs from Harvey, but also the impact of pollution and these spills, and the oil and chemicals going into the water....

"Even before Harvey, this storm and flood, people of color bore a disproportionate burden of having to live next to, surrounded by, these very dangerous chemicals We have a name for it. We call that environmental injustice and environmental racism."

A number of commentators have noted that Houston has been built up in a *laissez faire* and haphazard manner without regard to planning for things like Harvey, which made the situation worse. Just before Harvey hit, President Trump, with his Secretary of Transportation, Elaine Chao (wife of Senate Republican majority leader Mitch McConnell), behind him, revoked an Obama-era standard that required federal infrastructure projects to factor in the effects of climate change like flooding. So now federal projects for infrastructure rebuilding in Houston will disregard any planning for future storms.

This Trump edict was largely ignored in the press, because at nearly the same time Trump gave his infamous speech concerning Charlottesville, that included among other things that "there were good people" marching with the white supremacists, so the news of the edict was drowned out.

Trump's proposed budget also slashes by 50 percent money for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which is responsible for federal aid for the victims of Harvey.

Immigrants without papers were fearful of seeking rescue during the floods and going to shelters because of the possibility of being deported. Trump's unleashing of raids by Immigration and

Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents have terrorized Latino communities and especially the undocumented. Many Latino families have undocumented members, so whole families were frightened.

Compounding the problem for immigrants, during the flooding a Texas state law known as SB 4 was scheduled to go into effect, outlawing “sanctuary cities” like Houston, whose city government has ruled that its police will not aid ICE in rounding up and deporting immigrants without papers. Governor Abbott is not only a climate change denier; he is also on Trump’s anti-immigrant bandwagon.

If SB 4 is implemented, it would threaten police chiefs and city officials with criminal sanctions and penalties if they do not help deport immigrants.

SB 4 was scheduled to go into effect on September 1, but a federal judge temporarily blocked important provisions of the law a few days before, pending rulings on several lawsuits filed against it. However, the judge left intact SB 4’s “show me your papers” provision, which requires law enforcement officials to allow cops to ask about immigration status during routine detentions for anything from speeding to jaywalking – racial profiling.

Now Trump has rescinded the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program Obama created in 2012. DACA gave undocumented immigrants who were brought into the U.S. as children by their parents, a temporary reprieve from deportation and gave them work permits. This affected some 800,000 people, who are now on tenterhooks about their status. Of these 85,000 live in Houston, giving them and their families another reason to be fearful.

Trump put off the cancellation of DACA for six months. Ostensibly this would give the do-nothing Republican-controlled Congress time to come up with a fix. For sixteen years, under both Democratic and Republican majorities, Congress rejected legalizing the status of these people.

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