

USA & Asia - The politics of hurricanes: how climate catastrophe victimises the poor

Saturday 15 September 2018, by [HEARSE Phil](#) (Date first published: 15 September 2018).

While Trump denies that climate change is a reality, the United States is becoming one of the main victims of extreme climate events.

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Climate change catastrophe is, as this article is written, facing hundreds of thousands on the eastern seaboard of the United States and on the Philippines island of Luzon, as Hurricane Florence and Typhoon Mangkhut make landfall simultaneously. Mangkhut also threatens Hong Kong, South China and maybe Vietnam.

In the United States, Donald Trump has promised all necessary aid to the affected states - North and South Carolina and Virginia in particular. But the recent hurricane history of the United States is one of neglect and indifference towards poor and non-white populations - often the same people - not least by the Trump administration towards the people of Puerto Rico.

In the United States we see the same set of factors recurring: 1) Poor populations are disproportionately victims because their housing is substandard, because flood defences have been neglected and because they tend to live in the most vulnerable areas 2) Poor populations have a higher proportion of victims because they don't have the means to escape from the onrush of storm water 3) Survivors from Black and Latino populations suffer disproportionately in post-hurricane situations because they often lack the means to rebuild their homes, renew their possessions (including vital documents) or find missing relatives and 4) Local officials are often keen to aid property developers in stealing the land of the poor where their homes and businesses are not rebuilt. As a consequence of these factors communities and families are dispersed, which compounds the grieving and social distress of victims.

A major factor in all the US events discussed here is that a huge proportion of the poorest victims of hurricanes and floods cannot afford household insurance. Lack of insurance, or inadequate insurance, is a major source of theft from America's poorest.

Last year's hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico and because of the slow and weak emergency response, between 3000 and 5000 people dying unnecessarily. Two independent academic studies found that there were between 3000 and 5000 unnecessary deaths as a result of post-hurricane neglect. Trump responded on 11 September by typically denying the facts - tweeting that the reported death tolls from the storm were fabricated by Democrats "to make me look as bad as

possible”

Hurricane Maria was preceded by the equally appalling response to Hurricane Katrina which devastated New Orleans in 2005, Hurricane Sandy which smashed into New Jersey and parts of New York in 2012, and Hurricane Harvey which inundated Houston in 2017.

In all four of these disasters the pattern has been similar – hundreds of people dying unnecessarily as a consequence of insufficient aid, poor people losing everything (especially their homes) with little or no recompense from the state, and devastated working class areas becoming a business opportunity as they are rebuilt and gentrified.

There is a huge irony in all this of course. While the Trump administration denies that climate change is a reality, the United States is becoming one of the main victims of extreme climate events. As the hurricane season becomes more intense year by year, tropical storms and hurricanes are routinely making landfall in mainland United States with devastating consequences. And because of soaring temperatures, wildfires in the United States, while in long term trends fewer in number, are affecting a much larger area. A double whammy.

Katrina - Death, Destruction, Social Cleansing

According to Michael Parenti: *“On Day One of the disaster ... it was already clear that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of American lives had been lost in New Orleans. Many people had ‘refused’ to evacuate, media reporters explained, because they were just plain ‘stubborn. It was not until Day Three that the relatively affluent telecasters began to realize that tens of thousands of people had failed to flee because they had nowhere to go and no means of getting there. With hardly any cash at hand or no motor vehicle to call their own, they had to sit tight and hope for the best. In the end, the free market did not work so well for them.”* [1]

The rescue operation was a disaster. Parenti reports: “The federal government was nowhere in sight...The authorities seemed more concerned with the [stopping] looting than with rescuing people. It was property before people, just like the free marketeers always want.”

A consequence of the lack of state rescue efforts was that bodies were still being recovered in outlying areas weeks, and sometimes months, later.

More than one million people fled the city and its surrounding areas as a result of the storm. Hundreds of thousands of them never returned, lacking the resources to rebuild their homes. The experience of the evacuees was shocking. Laura Lein reported:

“While Gulf Coast residents from all walks of life came to Austin in the aftermath of the storm, those who occupied the poorest, and most heavily African-American, wards in New Orleans arrived with the fewest resources. Evacuees from these areas, which suffered the worst flooding and storm damage, often arrived with very little. Many lacked basic identification, a change of clothing, or necessary prescription drugs. They were often separated from family members”. [2]

New Orleans city officials decreed that people who had not started to rebuild their homes after a year would have their property taken from them. Hundreds of properties were confiscated, resulting in a change in the class and ethnic composition of previously poor Black areas, and a sharp decline in their overall population. In other words, Black communities have been broken up and much of their population moved out. Nearly 1 in 3 Black residents have not returned to the city after the storm. [3]

Land and property theft in the aftermath of a devastating hurricane now faces the people of Barbuda, Caribbean twin of neighbouring Antigua. In November 2017 Hurricane Irma devastated the island. In the wake of the near total destruction, the Antiguan and Barbadian Senate passed a law abolishing communal ownership of the land. With local people lacking resources to rebuild their homes, property developers are eager to move in and buy up land for a pittance. A consortium led by Hollywood actor Robert de Niro plans to build a large luxury resort called Paradise Found (sic!).

Superstorm Sandy and Hurricane Harvey

Storm Sandy, dubbed 'Frankenstorm' had a dramatic impact in New York and New Jersey. An amazing 518,000 households asked for federal aid after the storm. But once again the impact was much more dramatic in poor areas. Forty three percent of those 518,000 households had incomes of less than \$30,000 a year – dirt poor given US prices. Many of those were low income renters, and a high proportion of them were Black or Latino.

Working class areas were hit hardest because of their locations nearer shorelines and the flimsier construction of their homes. Chris Sellers reports of Mastic Beach: "Mastic Beach had long offered a cheaper version of shoreline property, in part because the land on which it lies was so uniformly close to sea level, near the water table. So when a Sandy surge washed in, 1,000 of its homes were flooded, many of them by both seawater and cesspool wastes. Next door, the original Westhampton Beach, hillier as well as more affluent, experienced far less damage from the storm." [4]

Seventy-two people died as a direct result of the storm and another 87 died in the days after, mostly older people who froze to death in homes and apartment blocks which were without heat.

A similar story of climate disaster hitting the poorest is what happened during and after Hurricane Harvey which devastated Houston in September 2017. One hundred and seven people died and 300,000 buildings damaged. According to the *New York Times*, despite a much higher level of aid than that given to Puerto Rico (see below), one year after 27% of Hispanics said their houses were still unfit to live in, compared with 20% of Black residents and 11% of whites. Fifty percent of non-white residents said they were not getting the help they needed to put their lives back together.

Puerto Rico: imperial contempt

Donald Trump visited Puerto Rico immediately after Hurricane Maria. He claimed that something between 18 and 64 people had died, and the territory's governor told him that the rescue effort was a 'a great job'. While his figures probably wildly underestimate the numbers killed immediately by the storm, they are mainly beside the point. Two academic studies, one by Harvard researchers and the other by academics at George Washington University, estimated between 3000 and 5000 extra deaths within six months of the storm's impact. Those deaths, often of older or sick people, were caused by lack of food, shelter, medical care and heating.

Among Trump's nonsense claims were that aid to Puerto Rico was difficult "because it is an island". Massive US government resources being sent to a Caribbean island were not in short supply on 25 October 1983, when the United States invaded Grenada and toppled the left-wing government there. Seven thousand three hundred US troops were landed within a day, and dozens of ship and planes went into action in the same time period. Those forces could be mobilised for a single island (many more could have been) because for the United States it was important. Rescuing the people of Puerto Rico was not.

Puerto Ric has an anomalous constitutional status as an 'unincorporated territory' of the United States, which reflects its real status as a virtual colony. The United States has sovereignty and the people of the island are US citizens, but they cannot vote in US elections. The hurricane and its aftermath have been a salutary lesson in their subordinate status.

Hurricane Maria also hit Cuba with devastating force. A BBC report pointed out the contest between the response in the two islands: "In Cuba, brigades of emergency services, hordes of police and firemen, as well as thousands of state employees, were in the streets of Havana from the moment it was safe to be out. Despite the lack of adequate materials, teams with chainsaws arrived to remove the worst of the felled trees and clear much of the debris" [5]

Typhoon Mangkhut: Climate Change disaster in Asia

What damage Typhoon Mangkhut will do to the Philippines at the time of writing cannot be known. But we can make an obvious prediction: it will be a lot worse than Hurricane Florence in the United States, because the storm is much more intense and because local people lack the resources of people in the US, however inadequate those might be for the poorest Americans. Climate change disasters in Asia are on an altogether more frightening scale than the United States. Millions are housed in flimsy self-built shacks, easily washed away. Millions live on hillsides subject to mudslides, especially in areas where logging has caused deforestation. Most national and local states are either unprepared to help civilian populations, or corrupt, or both. But most of all the scale of the typhoons and flooding has been much greater than storms and flooding in other parts of the planet, because the annual monsoon is the biggest rain event on the planet.

A recent scientific survey says that there is a distinct and obvious link between increasingly intense typhoons and rising temperatures. It says: "Even though no increase in the frequency of tropical cyclones and extreme typhoons in the Philippines is discernible, evidence exists that the nature of these hazards is changing, both in warmer temperatures and heavier rainfall." [6] Five of the 10 deadliest typhoons to hit the Philippines have come since 2006. The deadliest was 2013 Typhoon Haiyan, known locally as Typhoon Yolanda, which was responsible for more than 6,300 lost lives, over four million people displaced citizens, and \$2 billion in damage.

Civil defence and rescue services in the Philippines, mainly in the hands of the military, are skewed by intense inequality and corruption. But even without that, dealing with such events would tax a country where the majority of people are poor. According to the Climate Reality Project: "Evacuation plans, early-warning systems, and shelters are critical to dealing with extreme weather events. Warning and relocating thousands or millions of citizens when a storm is approaching would be a massive hurdle for any country - and in the case of a developing nation like the Philippines with nearly 100 million citizens spread out across thousands of islands, the hurdle becomes bigger still." [7]

But we know from the Cuban experience, albeit on a small island, that a society based on social solidarity, where the whole resources of the state and local community organisations are mobilised to deal with social disasters, can prepare to minimise the damage of hurricanes and similar events. Medical journalist Gail Reed says: "Hurricanes give you several days warning and the Cuban government gives seven days warning during which time local communities are given ample opportunity to prepare for the worst." [8]

Hurricanes Caused by Global Warming?

Climate change deniers always say that no particular climate incident can be put down to global warming. The same argument will be repeated with Hurricane Florence and Typhoon Mangkhut. This is a false argument because it deliberately misses the point, which is of course that the long-term trend of global warming is perfectly matches by the long-term trend towards warmer temperatures, especially warmer daytime temperatures, worldwide. With hurricanes the connection is direct. Florence started off as a group of thunderstorms off the coast of Africa, which merged and as a gigantic hurricane moved across the Atlantic.

And according to a new study [9] the destructive power of the typhoons that wreak havoc across China, Japan, Korea and the Philippines has intensified by 50% in the past 40 years due to warming seas.

Hurricanes, typhoons and flooding are just part of the climate catastrophe increasingly hitting the world's poorest people. Intolerably high temperatures and their corresponding wildfire destruction are the other side of the coin. We can no longer simply try to fight to prevent global warming, that warming and its dire consequences is upon us. Today we face a fight for climate justice, so that the poor and the oppressed worldwide can win the resources to survive and manage the potential disasters that threaten them.

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P.S.

- <https://prruk.org/the-politics-of-hurricanes-how-climate-catastrophe-victimises-the-poor/>
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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.marxsite.com/orleans.htm>

[2] <https://theconversation.com/still-waiting-for-help-the-lessons-of-hurricane-katrina-on-poverty-46666>

[3] <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2015/08/27/concentrated-poverty-in-new-orleans-10-years-after-katrina/>

[4] <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/why-superstorm-sandy-still-wreaking-havoc-poor-communities>

[5] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-41371793>

[6] <https://www.nature.com/articles/ngeo2792>

[7] <https://www.climaterealityproject.org/blog/how-climate-change-affecting-philippines>

[8] <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/A-Lesson-for-the-US-Cubas-Response-to-Hurricanes-20170828-0025.html>

[9] <https://www.nature.com/articles/ngeo2792>