



NC National Guard

Soldiers assigned to the Connecticut, Maryland and North Carolina National Guard work to distribute food and water to local first responders in Avery County.

Biden, planning North Carolina visit Wednesday, defends Cooper’s Helene response from Trump

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WASHINGTON

President Joe Biden will travel to North Carolina on Wednesday to see firsthand the devastation wrought over the weekend by Hurricane Helene, a storm that ripped through the Southeast with unexpected ferocity, leaving over 100 people dead and 600 still unaccounted for across 10 states.

Biden announced his plans to visit the storm-battered state on Monday as he repeatedly briefed the press about the emergency response to the storm, vowing to deploy the federal resources necessary for “as long as it takes” to help communities recover.

He also addressed claims by his predecessor, Donald Trump, that disaster aid was being withheld from Republican-leaning areas of the state by the Democratic governor of North Carolina — a key battleground in the November election.

“He’s lying, and the governor told him he was lying. The governor told him he’s lying. I’ve spoken to the governor, spent time with him, and he told him he’s lying,” Biden said during a video conference call with Cooper and others in the Oval Office.

The president added: “That’s simply not true, and it’s irresponsible.”

REALITY CHECK: Biden says Trump is lying about Cooper, NC Helene response. Here’s what’s really happening.

Biden told Cooper during the video conference call — seen by reporters in the room — that he planned to land in Raleigh for a meeting with the Emergency Operations Center on Wednesday, followed by an aerial tour of the damage. He will try to make similar trips to Florida and Georgia, he said.

“Thank you, Mr. President, we appreciate the resources that are coming our way,” Cooper said, noting that FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell was in North Carolina. “This has been a devastating storm, as you know, and we’re grateful to have had Administrator Criswell here on the ground all day today, making sure we serve assets into the area to get people food and water and get power back on. And obviously, we are grateful to the search and rescue teams as well.”

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The Category 4 hurricane made landfall in Florida on Thursday. But inland, mountainous Appalachian communities with little experience dealing with hurricane conditions faced a perfect storm

in Helene, which barreled through the Gulf of Mexico and Florida’s Big Bend with enough speed, breadth and intensity to bring devastation deep into the Southeast.

Biden said that over 3,600 personnel had already deployed to the region, including 1,000 officials from FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers, to help restore cell service as quickly as possible, hopeful that many of those who remain unaccounted for are still alive. FEMA is also working with Starlink, a satellite internet company owned by Elon Musk, to install receivers across Western North Carolina in the coming days, hoping to boost communication capabilities.

Two million people remain without power, officials said.

“I’ve directed my team to provide every, every available resource as fast as possible to your communities to rescue, recover, and to begin rebuilding,” Biden said.

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“This is an historic storm. It’s devastating. They’ve never seen anything like this before,” he added.

ALL-OF-GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Towns in Western North Carolina, southern Georgia and rural Kentucky are still faced with flooding from the storm, forcing FEMA and the Defense Department to airlift supplies like meals, fresh water and tarps to those hardest hit. Power is still down in many communities that, because of the damage, remain largely inaccessible and practically isolated.

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The crisis has prompted an all-of-government response from the Biden administration. On Monday, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas canceled planned travel to Mexico to focus on the emergency response.

At the White House on Monday, the president’s homeland security adviser, Liz Sherwood-Randall, told reporters that the administration understands that there “are 600 who are either lost or unaccounted for.”

“That’s the number we’re tracking right now,” she said. “Unfortunately, we know that the first information is often wrong.”

FEMA officials have said that rainfall totals in North Carolina, in particular, were “absolutely extreme” and exceeded expectations. The Department of Health and Hu-

man Services has declared a public health emergency throughout much of the Southeast warning of threats to the region’s water systems.

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Biden said he spent hours on Sunday speaking with local leaders, including Republican Gov. Brian Kemp of Georgia, Cooper of North Carolina, and local officials in affected regions of Florida, South Carolina and Tennessee.

“I want them to know: We’re not leaving until the job is done,” Biden said.

Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, where the storm first made landfall, told reporters at a news conference on Monday that he missed a call from Biden while he was on a plane Sunday. He did not say whether he attempted to call the president back.

For now, Florida has the situation “handled,” DeSantis said, encouraging federal officials to direct resources to North Carolina.

ELECTION-EVE STORM

Trump, who is running again for the presidency this year, has criticized the federal response and attempted to tie his Democratic rival, Vice President Kamala Harris, to the fallout in battleground states.

The former president visited Valdosta, Georgia, on Monday, to survey the damage. Later that afternoon, Harris visited FEMA headquarters in the afternoon to thank federal personnel there for working around the clock to expedite care to emergency zones.

She said she plans on traveling to the region as soon as possible — “but as soon as possible without disrupting any emergency response operations, because that must be the highest priority and the first order of business.”

“Entire neighborhoods have been destroyed, major roads have been blocked or damaged, leaving entire towns inaccessible at this very moment,” Harris said. “To everyone who has been impacted by this storm, and to all of those of you who are rightly feeling overwhelmed by the destruction and the loss: our nation is with you.”

“We will continue to do everything we can to help you recover and to help you rebuild,” she added, “no matter how long it takes.”

Miami Herald reporter Ana Ceballos and Lexington Herald-Leader reporter David Catanese contributed reporting.

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