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Smoke and flames rise in Lahaina, Hawaii, on the island of Maui Aug. 8, 2023 in this still imag

Smoke and flames rise in Lahaina, Hawaii, on the island of Maui Aug. 8, 2023 in this still image from video obtained from social media. (OSV News/Reuters/TMX/Jeff Melichar)



by OSV News

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Honolulu — August 11, 2023
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Catholic Charities Hawai'i in the Honolulu Diocese has appealed for donations to help the agency meet the housing, food and other needs of what could be thousands of victims from wildfires raging on the island of Maui that wiped out an entire town and drove people to seek refuge in the ocean.

News reports said that wildfires also were affecting the Big Island (officially named Hawaii), and by mid-afternoon Eastern time Aug. 10, crews continued to battle what authorities said were a total of three fires.

Maui County officials confirmed late Aug. 9 that at least 36 people have died and dozens more were injured; by the evening of Aug. 10, the death toll had risen to at least 53, according to Hawaii Gov. Josh Green. About 11,000 others have evacuated as wildfires burned the historic town of Lahaina "to the ground," as numerous news outlets reported. More than 271 structures were damaged or destroyed.

Other Maui communities affected by the fires include the Kihei area and inland communities known as Upcountry.

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"We can only imagine the distress and heartache that many are currently experiencing from the destructive wildfires on Maui, and our thoughts and prayers are with everyone impacted," said a statement posted on the website of Catholic Charities Hawai'i, which urged people to make a donation to the agency for Maui relief.

"As a community of hope we can help those in need to overcome this tragedy and rebuild their lives through recovery efforts. Thank you for your consideration and for your continued support as we navigate through this challenging time together," the agency said.

The Maui blazes began the night of Aug. 8. The National Weather Service said strong winds from Hurricane Dora, passing hundreds of miles to the southwest of the Hawaiian Islands, were partly to blame for fueling the fires, though authorities had not yet identified what caused the fires.

The status of Maria Lanakila Catholic Church in Lahaina and its parish school, Sacred Hearts School, had not yet been confirmed by the Diocese of Honolulu.

A charred boat lies in the scorched waterfront Aug. 9, 2023, after wildfires fanned by the winc

A charred boat lies in the scorched waterfront Aug. 9, 2023, after wildfires fanned by the winds of a distant hurricane devastated Lahaina, Hawaii, on the island of Maui. (OSV News/Reuters/Mason Jarvi)

According to the National Park Service, Lahaina holds deep cultural significance for Hawaiians as the district "was once the capital of the Hawaiian Kingdom." The Lahaina Historic District, which encompassed downtown Lahaina, Front Street and its vicinity, was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1962, according to the park service's website.

During an Aug. 10 visit to a Veterans Affairs medical center in Salt Lake City, President Joe Biden issued a federal disaster declaration for Maui and the Big Island, ordering "all available federal assets on the Islands to help with response." Green requested the declaration.

Green said in his statement, "This is a tragic day for everyone in Hawai'i and the nation. Our hearts go out to the families of the victims and the survivors suffering through the deadliest natural disaster the state has seen in generations."

"In the coming days — as more and more details emerge — I ask that we as a state provide all the emotional and financial support we can to the people of Lahaina and Maui," he said, adding that as governor, "I pledge to spare no resources to combat the destructive wildfires, shelter the displaced, treat and bring comfort to the traumatized, support our first responders, restore communication lines and enlist the aid of our federal and county partners to confront this once-in-a-lifetime catastrophe."

Smoke obscures an old courthouse Aug. 9, 2023, as wildfires driven by high winds destroy a l

Smoke obscures an old courthouse Aug. 9, 2023, as wildfires driven by high winds destroy a large part of the historic town of Lahaina, Hawaii, on the island of Maui. (OSV News/Reuters/Dustin Johnson)

According to Green, Biden's declaration makes federal funds available to affected individuals by providing grants for temporary housing and home repairs, low-cost loans to cover uninsured property losses and other assistance. The federal funds can help businesses as well as state and eligible county governments, and nonprofit organizations.

In his statement, Biden said he and first lady Jill Biden sent their "deepest condolences to the families of those who lost loved ones in the wildfires in Maui, and our prayers are with those who have seen their homes, businesses, and communities destroyed."

He said, "We are grateful to the brave firefighters and first responders who continue to run toward danger, putting themselves in harm's way to save lives."

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