

Europe ravaged by record storms—more than 100 dead

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The worst winter storms on record hit France at the weekend, leaving a death toll of over 60. Other European countries were also badly affected. According to the British Broadcasting Corporation, by Monday more than 100 people had been killed across the continent, over 80 on Sunday alone. Falling trees claimed many victims, causing accidents or crushing cars. The high winds blew down cranes and brought about extensive damage to buildings and trees.

In the Italian Alps, four climbers died in an avalanche in the Argentera valley on Sunday afternoon. A fifth was rescued. The severe weather caused a light plane to crash, killing the pilot and his instructor. Motorways were closed and the Bologna-Rimini railway was shut for two hours.

In Spain, five people died as a result of the strong winds. Two were crushed by a crane falling on a building and two workmen were killed on a building site when a wall collapsed. The national airline Iberia cancelled flights across a large area of the country from Santiago to San Sebastian.

In Britain, eight died and two sailors were reported missing, as gale-force winds swept the country. Particularly hard hit was the southwest. Hundreds of homes are potentially at risk from flooding, with 270 rivers cited in a flood alert.

In Switzerland, 13 were killed, including two who died when a cable car came down in the Alps. In Belgium, flooding rivers deprived 30,000 of clean drinking water in Charleroi, forcing the authorities to deliver supplies by tanker. In Austria, 2,000 people had to be evacuated from an arts centre when high winds threatened to blow off the roof. In a coach accident in the Tyrol caused by the bad weather, eight were injured, two seriously.

Outside France, Germany saw the highest number of

fatalities with at least 17 killed and hundreds wounded; 11 died in the state of Baden-Wurtemberg, and three in Bavaria. With blasts of up to 215 kilometres per hour, the highest winds on record, damage is estimated in hundreds of millions of German marks. The worst hit areas were in the south, less used to such violent storms. The Deutsche Bahn cancelled trains, and planes were grounded in Munich and Stuttgart.

French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin flew back early from his holiday in Egypt. Declaring the affected areas a disaster zone, he said, "The storm is a catastrophe without precedent."

On Tuesday, French estimates were that 62 had been killed, but at least eight people are still missing and the death toll could rise higher. The weekend's storms that hit Paris and France's northern cities killed around 40 people. This was followed on Monday by more severe weather, particularly affecting the southwest, where 12 died in the *Département* of Charente-Maritime.

The storms have severely disrupted electricity supplies. Over 2 million homes lost their supply at the weekend, and many will not have it restored before the new year. State-owned power utility Electricité de France (EdF) emergency phone lines registered up to 400 calls a second on Monday, as people rang to report loss of power. A further 1.2 million homes were without electricity Monday as a result of 120 pylons and over 5,000 posts being downed. On Tuesday morning, 90 percent of the inhabitants in the Dordogne were still without power.

The utility company said that around a quarter of its high-power lines had been disrupted, as well as switching facilities and low-power local supplies. The EdF has appealed to electricity companies in Britain, Spain and Italy to send repairmen to cope with the large number of downed power lines and pylons.

Speaking on Tuesday, Jean-Pierre Bourdier, EdF environment division chief, said, “Yesterday, before the second storm came, we thought we could restore power to the north, east and west of France by December 31. Unfortunately, I have to tell you we now have more than 3.4 million homes without power. To tell you honestly, we don't think we can restore power everywhere before December 31.”

The disruption to electricity supplies caused particular problems for hospitals and old age facilities. Some were able to use emergency generators, but a protracted loss of power affecting heating could cause further deaths amongst the elderly.

Emergency services were overwhelmed. The Paris fire brigade has answered over 10,000 calls since Saturday. Phone lines were also badly disrupted. France Telecom said that 300,000 subscribers had lost service and that another 350,000 might be affected by loss of power supplies to exchanges, or trees bringing lines down.

Rail traffic in many areas was suspended, with high-speed TGV trains stuck in stations due to trees on the lines, or downed power cables. Tens of thousands of passengers became stranded when the SCNF rail company cancelled services on Sunday and both Paris airports were closed for several hours. In the south, Bordeaux-Mérignac and Biarritz airports were closed. Many roads were affected by falling debris and main routes such as the A10 and A63 were closed due to the high number of fallen trees.

Tens of thousands of trees were uprooted, many in Paris's historic Bois de Boulogne (where up to 40 percent of some 300,000 trees are thought to be lost). Many historic monuments and buildings have been damaged. Over 10,000 trees in the grounds of the Versailles palace have been uprooted, some dating back to before the revolution. Also hit were the Louvre museum, the Musée d'Orsay, Notre Dame Cathedral and Balzac's house.

The severe weather comes hard on the heels of an oil tanker disaster off France's Atlantic coast. The Maltese-registered tanker Erika broke up 70 kilometres south of Finistère on December 12, disgorging millions of litres of oil into the sea. The high winds have since blown a massive slick onto the coast. The stricken tanker still contains 16.3 million litres (4.3 million gallons) in its hold—threatening more marine birds, fish and

crustaceans. Local fishermen say they face a massive loss in income in an area that is heavily dependent on fishing and tourism.

German meteorologist Friedrich-Wilhelm Gerstengarbe said that the west wind, which plays a decisive role for much of Europe's weather, has increased in strength and frequency over the last 25 years, a fact that he ascribes to global warming. Although the storm was unusually severe, it was not completely unexpected.

Meteorologists started to issue gale warnings on Saturday afternoon, forecasting winds up to 140 kilometres per hour. In the French daily *Le Monde*, Dominique Escalé, a forecaster with Météo-France, said that one problem was a lack of information about weather movements in the Atlantic. The storm grew rapidly over the ocean, then came ashore very quickly.

Escalé said, “We have only a small amount of data from the Atlantic, where we depend on fishing vessels and cargo ships which are at sea to supply it. During the holidays and bad weather there were fewer boats at sea. Satellite images can only supply additional weather information, they do not directly measure the wind, nor the atmospheric pressure, nor the intensity of meteorological phenomena.”

An editorial in Monday's *Le Monde* entitled “political depression” criticised politicians for their failure to act sooner. The editorial stated, “The question on Sunday was not what is the government doing, but where is the government?”



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