

# **Tornadoes wreak havoc across four US states**

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A wave of tornadoes swept through the American Midwest again Tuesday night, killing two people in the southern tip of Illinois and bringing the death toll over three days—May 4-6—to at least 43.

Eastern Kansas, southwestern Missouri and western Tennessee were the hardest hit by the severe weather on Sunday night and Monday, but there were scattered tornadoes and damage caused by high winds and flooding in Arkansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, Iowa and Kentucky as well.

The 41 earlier deaths—18 in Missouri, 16 in Tennessee and 7 in Kansas—represented the largest tornado death toll in four years, since storms killed 46 people in Oklahoma and Kansas in 1999. Some 36 died last fall in a slew of tornadoes across the South that extended from the Gulf of Mexico to Tennessee.

The storms were remarkable both for their number—the 84 tornadoes confirmed by the US Weather Service would be the seventh largest number generated by a single weather system—and by their intensity. With winds up to 250 mph and funnel clouds as wide as half a mile, many of the tornadoes were categorized as F-4s, the second highest ranking on the scale, and a few many have been F-5s, the most intense weather phenomena known to man.

Even a smaller tornado can cause extensive death and destruction. The tornadoes that cut a 65-mile swath through western Tennessee, heavily damaging Jackson and killing 11 people, were initially believed to be only category F-2, with winds below 150 mph.

A half dozen small towns were obliterated in eastern Kansas and southwestern Missouri, where dozens of tornadoes were reported along a front of more than 200 miles, from Kansas City south to the Arkansas border of Missouri. The Kansas City airport terminals were evacuated and passengers took shelter in tunnels, but there were no deaths reported in the metropolitan area of over one million people.

Half of the southeast Kansas town of Franklin was destroyed, and dogs were brought in by the state police to search the rubble for victims. The town of Ringo was virtually wiped out, according to Crawford County Sheriff Sandy Horton, and three people were killed outside the town of Girard. A bank deposit bag from a farmer's home near Girard was recovered near Springfield, Missouri, more than 100 miles to the east.

The worst devastation from the storms came in Pierce City, in southwestern Missouri, a town of 1,400 people in which nearly every building along the town's main shopping street was pulverized. Many of the structures are more than a century old, renovated as tourist attractions in the 1990s, but unable to withstand the force of the 200-mph winds. Wood, concrete, iron and steel lay strewn along Commercial Street, the town thoroughfare.

Mayor Mark Peters said that all 40 of the town's businesses, which pay half the city's budget through sales taxes, were at least temporarily idled. State and federal officials suggested that the entire shopping district might have to be bulldozed to clear away debris, forcing all the local businesspeople to rebuild from scratch.

As many as a dozen people were killed in Pierce City, Stockton and other nearby towns in Lawrence County. Most of the towns remain without electric power, sewage treatment or drinkable water, or lack some combination of the three. Members of the National Guard's 203rd Engineering Battalion, mobilized to Fort Leonard Wood for deployment to Iraq, were sent back to their home towns in Lawrence County to assist in the cleanup.

The largest city to be hit hard by the storm was Jackson, Tennessee, 60 miles east of Memphis on the I-40 corridor to Nashville, the state capital. Officials of Madison County, which includes Jackson, declared a state of emergency after several tornadoes swept

through the area, destroying many government buildings in downtown Jackson, knocking out electrical power and killing 11 people.

At least 70 homes on the city's east side were destroyed, and downed trees and power lines blocked many streets. Madison County emergency manager director Edlon Bedene said, "It wiped out a third of the town, I hate to say it. The trees are like somebody came in and cut them off 10 feet above the ground." Mayor Charles Farmer told the press, "It's real bad. It looks sort of like Baghdad after we finished with it."

One of the tornadoes hopped and skipped through downtown Jackson, wrecking a fire station, a water treatment plant, the main post office, a school, a factory and the 911 emergency call center. No one was killed, despite this destruction, because the storm came through at 11:35 p.m. on a Sunday night. If the tornadoes had hit during a business day, when downtown is crowded with office workers and shoppers, the death toll could have been in the hundreds.

As in Missouri and Kansas, there was ample advance warning of the storm. The city of Jackson was notified 22 minutes before the tornadoes hit. The main loss of life was among the poorest section of the population living just outside the city in cheap housing without basements, where people are advised to take refuge.

Nine people, two of them children, died in Denmark, a community of a few dozen homes, many of them trailers, 12 miles southwest of Jackson. Three Denmark families lost two or more members apiece.

One of the children, seven-year-old Lee McLaughlin, was pulled from the arms of his mother as the tornado smashed through their mobile home. Rhonda McLaughlin survived, but her young son's body was found some distance from the site. The boy's father, Tom, is a truck driver who was driving home from Nashville when the storm hit.

Two more died—a young woman in her early 20s and her year-old baby—when the tornado ripped off the roof of their apartment in a public housing unit east of the city. The mother covered her child with her body, but both were killed when the chimney fell on top of them. The aging brick buildings in the Parkview Courts project have no basements.

The response of the Bush administration to the deaths and devastation was perfunctory at best. At the request

of Missouri Governor Bob Holden and Kansas Governor Kathleen Sibelius, the White House declared federal disasters in 39 Missouri counties and seven in Kansas. This makes residents of those areas eligible for emergency relief of up to \$10,000 apiece, and low-interest loans to repair damage not covered by insurance.

Although Jackson, Tennessee suffered the largest single death toll and by far the heaviest property damage, there has been no federal disaster declaration for Madison County. FEMA Director Michael D. Brown, undersecretary of the Department of Homeland Security, was to visit the city Wednesday.

During his stopover in Pierce City, Brown virtually wrote off its prospects for recovery, declaring, "No matter how much money we put into this community, we're never going to make it whole again." He compared the scene in Pierce City to the devastation wrought by the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, adding, fatalistically, "The president's going to win the war on terrorism, I'm sure of that. We're never going to win the war against Mother Nature."

Bush himself was in the region Monday for a scheduled speech in Little Rock, Arkansas on his tax cut for the wealthy. He promised federal aid "where help is justified," adding that "the best thing we can do right now is to pray for those who have suffered."

For all the ritualistic invocations of religion, however, it is science which has had a real impact on the struggle against natural disasters. The death toll May 4-5 could have gone much higher but for improvements in detection and early warning. Unlike storms a decade or more ago, the Sunday night tornadoes took few people by surprise, and most residents of the affected areas had time to find underground shelter.

The president flew 3,000 miles to make his stage-managed appearance last week on the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln*. But despite being only a few minutes flying time away—Jackson, Tennessee, for instance, is only 220 miles from Little Rock—Bush did not visit any of the areas hardest-hit by the storm.



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