

Flooding displaces thousands in US Midwest

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Severe storms and flooding throughout the central US Plains and Midwest have displaced thousands of people and left hundreds of thousands without power. At least 26 deaths have been attributed to two storm systems that moved through the area in the past week.

Emergencies were declared in five states in the upper Midwest and Plains states. Heavy flooding has damaged or destroyed at least 6,000 homes throughout Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio—states not historically known for flood problems. Consequently, many residences were not insured for flood damage. In flood-stricken southwest Wisconsin, for example, only 5 to 10 percent of homeowners, about 1,400, had flood insurance.

Flooding was so severe in Findlay, Ohio, after the Blanchard River rose 7 feet above flood stage that at least 500 residents were forced to evacuate and hundreds sought sanctuary in emergency shelters. A 92-year-old man died Thursday when he tried to escape his car that had become partially submerged in water.

Ohio Governor Ted Strickland declared a state of emergency on Wednesday in 9 of 21 Ohio counties, in what is now being referred to as “The Flood of 2007.” Extensive damage was done to residences, public buildings and businesses. Agricultural crops, a crucial segment of the regional economy, are expected to sustain widespread damage.

On Friday, some downtown streets in Findlay remained navigable only by boat, and owners of businesses and shops began the painstaking task of cleaning up the damage. Water had become mixed with sewage and petroleum products and left behind a filthy residue. The City Council has appropriated \$500,000 for cleanup efforts.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, who arrived in Findlay to assess the damage, commented, “The damage here is on a scale I don’t think anybody expected. And preventing it is the best way to deal with

it. Engineering takes time, and we want it to be done the right way. But certainly we want to see these issues addressed as quickly as possible.”

As with the recent bridge collapse in Minnesota, Bush administration officials have sought to respond publicly and more rapidly, sensitive to the population’s growing hostility to the government’s record of indifference to such tragedies.

US Rep. Marcy Kaptur (Democrat of Toledo, Ohio), speaking at a recreation center being used as a shelter, said that the floods that have damaged the area could have been prevented. She blamed the US Army Corps of Engineers for “dragging its feet.”

In southern Minnesota, preliminary damage reports from the American Red Cross estimate 4,200 homes were damaged in flooding and mudslides. President Bush declared three counties major disaster areas there, making FEMA funds available to flood victims.

On August 23, a powerful storm struck the Chicago area with high winds, heavy rain and tornado conditions near the city’s evening rush hour. Road and rail traffic were paralyzed for hours. No sirens were sounded in the city because, according to city officials, the National Weather Service told them there was no immediate danger.

In one west Chicago suburb, 40 people were injured when the roof of a two-story brick warehouse collapsed. Lightning struck the roof of a juvenile detention facility, causing a fire and forcing the evacuation of 36 prisoners. Chicago’s WMAQ television reported the city’s 9-1-1 and 3-1-1 emergency services received more than one call every second during the storm.

Well over 300,000 Chicago-area residents lost power, and according to utility ComEd, over 230,000 homes and businesses remained without electricity on Friday, mostly on the north side of the city. The two major Chicago airports also lost power Thursday night. At

O'Hare International Airport, one of the largest hubs in the world, around 500 flights out of the city were cancelled and delays averaged two-and-a-half hours for in- and outbound flights.

Aerial footage from Chicago's WGN Channel 9 traffic helicopter showed some neighborhoods nearly entirely submerged as of Friday. Surveys of Indiana revealed similar conditions, with sections of Interstate 80/94 submerged. 30,000 residents in Indiana and 100,000 in Michigan were left without power.

Intentionally or not, virtually all reports belie the lack of government preparation for such a disaster. Countless exhausted local law enforcement and volunteer rescuers are put before network cameras to convey their anxieties.

A WGN 9 report from Des Plaines, Illinois, included interviews with local residents who were sandbagging around their already flooded neighborhoods just blocks away from a partially erected but apparently abandoned flood barrier begun by the state. The Des Plaines River, which is already six feet above flood stage, is not expected to crest until next Wednesday. More rain is expected to hit the area over the weekend.

Chicago WMAQ television visited one subdivision surrounded by a moat of floodwater attempting to stave off flooding with a sump pump and a garden hose.

ABC News footage from Racine, Wisconsin, showed tons of ruined personal effects piled up at the curb and in dumpsters. "Still unreal," one resident told the reporter as she cleaned, "depressing that everything we've worked for for the past six years is in the dumpster now."

ABC also aired footage from Gurnee, Illinois, of young children and their parents laboriously shoveling sand into bags for fortifications to protect the local school. "We need this building," a local resident said. "It has to open next week. We've got 400-plus kids in this building. There's no other place to put them."

Such scenes epitomize the massive diversion of social resources that has steadily, but not always obviously, undercut America's safety net in the past several years. Given the severity of the flooding, the very limited response of the Federal Emergency Management Agency is especially significant. People feel, quite legitimately, that it is sink or swim.

Particularly in the Midwest, years of manufacturing job cuts have worn down communities and crippled the

ability of individual families to cope with difficulties. Tax cuts and business handouts have siphoned away state funding for stocks of emergency supplies and reconstruction efforts.

And the war in Iraq has stripped the region not only of funds but also of the manpower National Guard units could provide in terms of rescue and repair. The full effect of this depletion of resources will undoubtedly become more evident as communities and families begin the recovery process. The Bush administration's handling of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 has had echoes in every natural disaster since.



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