

Tornadoes kill at least 54 in Southern US states

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7 February 2008

At least 54 people were killed and hundreds more injured as a series of powerful tornadoes swept across five Southern US states late Tuesday and overnight, destroying and damaging homes, schools, hospitals, businesses and factories from Arkansas to Kentucky.

The storm system, which could have spawned as many as 69 tornadoes, was still doing damage as it headed east Wednesday, with parts of Alabama, Florida and Georgia under tornado watches.

According to emergency officials, the tornadoes killed 30 people in Tennessee, 13 in Arkansas, seven in Kentucky and four in Alabama. It was the highest single-day tornado-related death toll since May 3, 1999, when twisters in Oklahoma and Kansas killed 50 people, the Associated Press reported.

Authorities expect the number of fatalities and injuries could rise as rescuers search for other victims, including in the wreckage of a Sears store in a Memphis mall, and reach more remote rural areas.

“Tornadoes in February, especially this many and this strong, is a rare event,” Buddy Rogers, spokesman for the Kentucky Emergency Management Office, said by phone. “We have seven deaths, and if we’re fortunate that number won’t rise.”

The destruction began in Arkansas when a tornado touched down in Atkins, a small town of 2,800 people, about 60 miles northwest of the state capital of Little Rock. Among those killed were a couple and their 11-year-old daughter when their home “took a direct hit” from the storm, said Pope County Coroner Leonard Krout.

As daybreak illuminated the damage Wednesday, the AP reported, “Seavia Dixon, whose Atkins, Ark., house was shattered, stood Wednesday morning in her yard, holding muddy baby pictures of her son, who is now a 20-year-old in Iraq. Only a concrete slab was left from

the home. The family’s brand new white pickup was upside-down, about 150 yards from where it was parked before the storm. Another pickup the family owned sat crumpled about 50 feet from the slab.”

Eyewitnesses in the area told the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* that the twister touched down three or four times, ripping roofs off some houses and reducing others to rubble. Emergency crews went door to door seeking other possible victims, the Pope County sheriff’s office said.

The storm continued northward causing heavy damage in the towns of Clinton, Gassville and Mountain View, Arkansas. Injuries also were reported in Cleveland and Hattiesville. A boat factory in Van Buren County collapsed because of high winds, according to reports.

To explain the violent storms, meteorologists noted that a cold front met a mass of warm, moist air that has been over the state for days. Temperatures reached the 70s (Fahrenheit) in parts of Arkansas Tuesday, with lows in the 20s forecast for parts of the state behind the front.

Tennessee recorded the most fatalities, along with 150 people injured. Several were killed and wounded in Memphis where a twister ripped out utility poles, leaving 20,000 people without power, and collapsed roofs and walls at a shopping mall. One resident of neighboring Fayette County was killed when his pickup truck flipped over as he tried to flee his home. Several other motorists were injured by high winds and debris striking their vehicles.

Seventy-five miles northeast of Memphis at least two dormitories were destroyed and the roof of a classroom building sheared off at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, the same city where a 2003 tornado killed 11 people and a 1999 twister killed 9. Rescuers saved

12 students trapped in the debris. More than 1,000 students were on the campus when the storm struck.

Tennessee Governor Phil Bredesen gave a press conference Wednesday after touring Macon County, northeast of Nashville, where 12 residents were killed and 65 injured. He said homes in the path of the powerful tornado were reduced “to stacks of kindling.” If the rural area had had more residents, he said, the loss of life would have been far greater. In response to a reporter’s question, the governor acknowledged that it was unlikely the small towns in the county had tornado warning sirens.

In nearby Sumner County, a tornado sucked an 11-month-old boy and his mother from their home. They were found later in a field. The child survived in good condition, but his mother was dead.

A twister hit a natural gas pumping plant in nearby Hartsville, Tennessee, causing a massive explosion, but no injuries were reported.

The storms also did extensive damage in Oxford, Mississippi. State officials reported no deaths but about 11 injuries after two tornadoes ripped across an industrial park, seriously damaging a Caterpillar factory and farm communities north of the University of Mississippi campus.

As is the case in so many natural disasters, there was a social component to this tragedy. Inevitably, those who suffered the most were working class families forced to live in homes vulnerable to high winds and extreme weather.

In western Kentucky, for example, three people were killed as a storm tore through a trailer park outside of Greenville in Muhlenberg County, one of two mobile home parks hit in the county, state police said.

Trailer homes—which an increasing number of families are compelled to buy to save money—are known as “tornado deathtraps,” accounting for more than 40 percent of all tornado deaths in the US since 1985, and more than 50 percent in recent years. In 2007, 52 of 81 people killed in tornadoes lived in mobile homes, while 16 lived in permanent homes, according to the National Weather Service.

Mobile homes use thin metal straps or bolts to hold them in place and generally lack a firm foundation. They have no interior rooms or basements in which to take shelter during bad weather. Harold Brooks, a research meteorologist at the National Severe Storms

Laboratory in Norman, Oklahoma, estimated that mobile home residents are between 15 to 20 times more likely to die in a tornado than those who live in wood-frame houses.

Meteorologists have speculated that the repeated episodes of severe weather—this is the second series of tornadoes to hit western Kentucky in a week—may be attributable to the La Niña weather patterns, when below-normal sea surface temperatures along the equator in the Pacific Ocean shift the jet stream, putting Kentucky and other states in the path of warm, wet weather.

Many scientists, however, argue that global warming is contributing to more severe weather patterns. In a climate model developed last year at NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies, researchers concluded that the most extreme storms and tornadoes—which produce damaging horizontal and vertical winds and are the major source of weather-related casualties—would become more common as the Earth’s climate warms.



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