

Recent tornadoes in the Southern US: both a natural and social disaster

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A week after tornadoes ravaged several Southern US states, the magnitude of the disaster is finally becoming clear. The storms of February 5 were the deadliest of their kind to be recorded in one 24-hour period since 1999, claiming the lives of 59 people.

Thirteen were killed in Arkansas, seven in Kentucky, and five were killed in Alabama where some 500 homes were also destroyed. Tennessee was the hardest hit, with 34 killed and 230 citizens still unaccounted for in the poor, farming areas of Macon County near the Kentucky border.

President Bush declared the devastated Tennessee and Arkansas sites “major disasters” earlier this week, thereby allowing federal assistance to be used in recovery and rebuilding efforts. The president toured the Macon County area on Friday. Speaking in front of county residents, he said, “I have no doubt in my mind this community will come back better than before. Macon County people are down to earth, hardworking, God-fearing people, who if just given a little help, will come back stronger.” Residents no doubt recalled similar pledges made by Bush—and never fulfilled—in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the organization disgraced by its performance during the Katrina disaster, in a February 7 release states the agency has sent Mobile Emergency Response Support teams to Tennessee to make available “mobile telecommunications, operational support, life support, and power generation needs as identified.” Other Emergency Response Teams and Preliminary Damage Assessment Teams were sent to Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, and Arkansas to assist local officials in those areas.

It is a testament to the prevailing lack of faith in FEMA to provide for the victims of disasters that many warnings were issued to the organization by local and federal officials representing the affected regions prior to the

agency’s involvement. Arkansas Senator Mark Pryor said in a recent statement that he had spoken with FEMA Director David Paulison and “made it clear that [he] would not tolerate a slow reaction time,” adding that, “FEMA must not use bureaucratic excuses to avoid helping Arkansans.”

In 2007, FEMA took 12 days to respond to federal assistance requests from Arkansas after a tornado struck the town of Dumas. The agency eventually denied the requests.

While Tennessee and Arkansas have received federal disaster declarations, the remaining states hit by the storms have not. Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear, a Democrat, has yet to ask the federal government for assistance, saying he is awaiting the completion of damage assessments by several more communities throughout the state.

According to preliminary assessments, 494 homes across Kentucky received damage in the storms while 99 were destroyed entirely. In Lexington, Kentucky—located in the central region of the state, far from the southwestern area hardest hit by the tornadoes—there was an estimated \$1.7 million in property damage, due largely to severe “straight-line” winds that accompanied the storms. In addition to the seven fatalities caused by the tornadoes, 85 people are reported to have been injured statewide.

As is so often the case, mobile homes were involved in a number of deaths caused by the recent wave of tornadoes. Three people in Muhlenberg County, Kentucky—Bobby Joe Crick, his wife Diane and their daughter Gilda Ann—were killed in the Nolen’s County Manor mobile home park when their home was crushed by the storm. Of the 23 mobile homes in the park, only 8 survived the disaster.

From Tennessee came the devastating story of a man injured in a mobile home who was desperately in need of

medical attention but did not receive it. Ray Story and his wife Nona called 911 after learning that Mr. Story's relative, Bill Clark, had been badly injured when his mobile home was destroyed. It took two hours for an ambulance to arrive at their location, by which time it was too late. When the medical team then received warning that another tornado might be approaching, they were forced to flee. Left with no other options, Mr. and Mrs. Story placed Clark's body in the back of their own pickup truck and drove for hours through heavy debris to a hospital.

Adding to the dangers faced by families living in mobile homes in times of severe weather, many of the poorer areas in which mobile home parks are situated do not have adequate severe weather warning systems. As with the devastating tornadoes that swept through Kentucky and Indiana in 2005, killing 22 people, it appears this was a factor in some of the poor and rural areas where many of the fatalities occurred during the latest wave of tornadoes.

Macon County, Tennessee, where 14 died, has no tornado sirens at all. Alabama also lacks a sufficient number of sirens in its rural areas. Because of the lack of sirens, many residents in the path of last Tuesday's storms simply were not aware of the impending danger until it was too late to take proper precautions.

Weather disasters are compounded by poverty and poor infrastructure in other ways as well. Many residents lacked access to safe shelters and the most basic emergency equipment such as handheld radios and communication devices. Damage to roadways, bridges and power lines in more rural areas can cut off large sections of counties until repair crews are sent out, a process that can sometimes takes days. Poor counties are reliant on small, under-funded, mainly volunteer fire and rescue squads. In emergency situations, rescuers themselves are sometimes among those hit by the disasters.

Alabama's *Birmingham News* carried comments made by US Representative Bud Cramer after a tour of storm-damaged sites in that state: "We need radios in every house in rural communities in Alabama and we haven't had funding for that. It's about time that we did create funding for that." Discussing the lack of warning sirens in the state, Alabama Governor Bob Riley added, "Can the state afford to put sirens all over the state of Alabama right now? We can't without a tremendous amount of federal assistance."

Federal funding, however, is in short supply. Lack of

warning sirens and other problems with disaster preparedness are the result in no small part of significant cutbacks and shortfalls in vital emergency management programs. The National Emergency Management Association, in a press release published in 2006, found there was a \$287 million shortfall in the Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG), a grant which in the words of the NEMA press release "is the only federal funding available to state and local governments for all-hazards planning, training and exercises as well as some personnel costs." "The fear is," the report states, "that as the gap grows, the nation's ability to respond to disasters of all types is seriously compromised."

Democratic Senator Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas spoke at a press conference after the storms, commenting on cuts in vital emergency management programs such as the EMPG: "These cuts mean a state like Arkansas' ability to plan for and respond to natural disasters like the tornadoes that hit us yesterday is seriously diminished."

The picture emerging in the wake of this latest disaster is an increasingly familiar one. Like the California wildfires in 2007 or Hurricane Katrina in 2005, this is a natural disaster exacerbated by the social disaster of the profit system. While billions are spent waging illegal wars—and the political representatives of the American ruling elite clear the way for the broadest possible accumulation of wealth by a few—the most basic and necessary needs of the majority of the population in the US are not met.

Lacking well-constructed, affordable housing, many working class families are compelled to live in homes that render them vulnerable to severe weather. In fact, no less than half of all tornado deaths consist of people living in mobile homes. The lack of weather sirens and emergency radios puts them in greater danger. With cuts to emergency management funds leaving no guarantee of proper training and equipment for rescue and recovery teams, the ability of working people to cope with a natural disaster like the storms of February 5 is severely crippled.



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