More than 20 killed as tornadoes strike the southern US

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More than 20 people were killed this weekend when at least 77 tornadoes touched down across the southern and southwestern United States. The storms claimed lives in Oklahoma, Georgia, and Missouri, while causing considerable damage in several other states. The latest wave of storms has helped to make 2008 the deadliest tornado season in a decade and the seventh deadliest since 1950, when such records first began being kept.

On Sunday, an EF-4 tornado, which carries the second highest rating possible, touched down in Picher, Oklahoma, killing six and destroying home after home. Trees were ripped from the ground and torn to splinters while cars were left twisted and mangled. Frank Geasland, head of Emergency Management in the area, told reporters, “It looks like a bomb went off.”

Picher is a heavily polluted former mining town. Once home to a population of 20,000 people, the town now has just 800 inhabitants. The tornado blew leftover waste from the town’s lead and zinc mines, closed for more than a decade, into the air making it necessary for officials to run tests to determine any possible health risks. Many of the town’s residents had begun taking part in a federal buyout program with the Environmental Protection Agency due to health risks already presented by the polluted environment. It remains unclear how those involved in the buyout whose homes were destroyed in the storms will be affected.

In Missouri, where at least 15 were killed, inadequate shelter appears to have been a major factor in the number of fatalities. Most of the deaths involved people whose homes had no basements or solid foundations and those who were compelled to take refuge in their cars. Many mobile homes were simply blown away, never to be seen again. As the *Kansas City Star* put it in one headline, “Safety hard to find in storm that killed 15.”

Mobile homes are involved in half of all tornado deaths in the United States. In the absence of safe, affordable housing, poor and working class people are often forced to turn to such inadequate structures, which provide little or no shelter in severe weather conditions. This is the social element, often ignored by the mainstream news media in their coverage of such events, which compounds otherwise natural disasters, leading to deaths that might have been prevented had more suitable shelter been available.

Just as in Missouri, housing was a factor again as a man was killed and his wife and children injured when one of half-a-dozen tornadoes destroyed their mobile home near Dublin, Georgia. Six thousand homes in all were destroyed across the state, with an estimated $50 million in insured losses. Prison labor is currently being used during cleanup in Clayton, the county hardest hit by the storms. Several dozen inmates were seen Monday cutting away damaged trees and removing debris from the property of county residents.

Meteorologists have attributed the increase in the number and intensity of these and similar storms this year to several factors including sharp temperature contrasts in the US, warming in the Gulf of Mexico, and progressive jet stream patterns. While some meteorologists have chosen to play down the effect of global warming on such disasters, in August 2007, researchers with NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies developed climate models which made clear that tornadoes and thunderstorms will grow more intense as the Earth’s temperature rises.

With poor quality housing and inadequate warning systems such as sirens in rural areas playing such a major role in severe weather deaths, one fears new

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records in the numbers of fatalities will only be made and broken in the near future.

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