

# Violent storms cause 52 deaths in France

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The violent storms that caused havoc during the weekend throughout Western Europe did the most damage in France, during the night of February 27-28. By Tuesday evening the death toll was 52. In Vendée, 33 lives were lost, and 11 died in Charente-Maritime, most by drowning. Eight people are reported missing.

The storm, dubbed Xanthia, was the most lethal storm in France since the 1999 storms that caused 92 deaths.

Wind gusts reached up to 160 kilometres per hour. At the top of the Eiffel Tower, wind speeds of 175 kph were recorded. Air France said 100 of its flights from Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris were canceled.

Exceptionally high seas broke over and through inadequate sea defenses and swamped homes, many of which had been constructed in areas designated high-risk for flooding. People were overtaken in their sleep by the rapidly rising water. On Monday morning, 10,000 emergency staff searched for survivors on France's Atlantic coast.

Thousands have been made homeless along the coast. Local economies have been badly damaged, with fisheries, oyster farms and businesses destroyed, crops obliterated and thousands of hectares of farmland contaminated with sea water. Residents have taken the lead in relief, providing shelter to those who have lost their homes and providing clothing and food to those taking refuge in public facilities.

The storm brought considerable damage to inland France as well, notably in the Pyrenees and the Alps, where several winter sports resorts were hit.

The government has made €3 million available for relief.

On Sunday, some 1 million households were deprived of electricity because of lines brought down by falling trees and debris. Prompt action by electricity workers reconnected 500,000 homes by Sunday night. Some 222,000 homes were without electricity at midday on Monday and the EDF electricity utility calculated that,

apart from the heavily flooded areas, power will be restored everywhere by Tuesday night or Wednesday.

Anger is mounting at the defective quality and lack of proper maintenance of the 7,000 to 10,000 kilometres of dikes protecting the coasts of France, particularly on the west coast, where the Charente-Maritime and Vendée departments are situated and most damage has been done.

As with Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005, the Haitian earthquake on January 12 and the Chilean earthquake which also struck at the weekend, the storms have laid bare the class nature of French society. While the death toll in France is far less, in each case profits have taken priority over preparations for the safety and well-being of the mass of the population, greatly exacerbating the destruction wrought by natural disasters.

The hardest hit town was L'Aiguillon-sur-Mer in Vendée, where 25 bodies were recovered after a dike collapsed. "A local governor said the walls dated back to the time of Napoleon and needed to be replaced with taller barriers," the BBC reported, while town planners "are being blamed for constructing a mobile home park so close to the old sea wall."

Reuters on Monday reported that "the collapse of the dikes on the Atlantic coasts led to multiple drownings in the homes, often bungalows, built in estates close to the sea." As Sarkozy's secretary of state for ecology admitted, many of the dikes in France were built in the 17th century. She estimated that about 1,000 kilometers of these defences are considered to be "at risk."

While "Météo France had issued a red alert from Friday, an extremely rare step, for the departments concerned," according to one report, "no evacuation measures seem however to have been taken in the communes near to the sea."

There is evidence suggesting that French authorities were well aware of the dangers posed by flooding. *Le*

*Parisien* reported on Tuesday that the Ministry of Ecology and Sustainable Development had determined in 2008 “the main natural danger in France is flooding,” with 16,000 communities and 5.1 million inhabitants at risk.

“Indeed, Mer and L’Aiguillon-sur-Mer, which have registered the most fatalities (27), are situated in a coastal zone at risk,” the newspaper reported. “A study issued in October 2008 by the Vendée Department of Equipment (DDF) affirmed that the municipality of Faute-sur-mer had been built ‘on vast spaces won from the sea, without the history of danger being taken into account.’”

The study warned that the combination of river flooding and marine flooding “could have a significant impact in the densified zones behind a network of ageing dikes.” *Le Parisien* also reported that Chantal Jouanno had also hinted that “the town halls thus also often yielded to the will of the housing firms to build by the sea or rivers. ... Thus it is that since 1999, 100,000 dwellings have been built in the floodable zones of 424 large municipalities, 8,000 of them in Alpes-Maritimes, le Var and Val-de-Marne, despite the risks involved.”

Feigning surprise, President Sarkozy on a visit Monday morning to the disaster areas declared, “Questions must be raised as to how in France in the 21st century families can be caught in their sleep and be drowned in their homes.... It is unacceptable.” But the Sarkozy government has disclaimed any responsibility, with secretary of state for transport, Dominique Busseau, denying “any malfunctioning of the state in the catastrophe.”

Sarkozy himself had urged a loosening of the Coastal Law restricting building in floodable zones during the 2007 presidential election campaign. “I think it is necessary at the same time to strengthen it in order the better to fight the cases of avoidance and to make it more flexible so as not to hinder the normal development of the communes while maintaining the general goal of the protection of the environment,” Sarkozy said in interview published in the April 13 issue of *Le Marin*.

In the midst of campaigning for regional and local elections scheduled for mid-March, the parties of the “left” and right have called an informal truce to avoid discussion of who bears responsibility for the

catastrophe. Ségolène Royal, the defeated Socialist Party candidate in the 2007 presidential election, and president of the Poitou-Charentes region, echoed Sarkozy’s assertion that “this is not the time for polemics, it is the time for mourning.” France’s ex-left parties have been in charge of many municipalities and regions where construction permits have been issued to local businesses in dubious zones.

The government wants to use the disaster to divert attention from its political offensive against the working class. Sarkozy’s popularity is at an all-time low because of his plans to reduce the vast national debt and budget deficit by savage reductions in government spending on the social services. These measures are being imposed across the continent by the European Union in order to pay for the bailout of the leading banks and to prevent the collapse of the euro. Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel are leading the EU offensive demanding Athens impoverish the Greek working class in order to prevent sovereign default.

The incompetence of the government stands in juxtaposition to recent scientific advances in meteorology relied upon by the state weather forecasting service Météo France, which spared France a far worse disaster. An interview given by meteorologist Hubert Drevetton to *Le Parisien* said great progress had been made since the 1999 storms. This time Météo France had forseen both the intensity and whereabouts of the storm. “For the 1999 storms the system of vigilance alert did not exist,” he said. “In the space of 12 years we have really made progress, we have much more satellite observation and much more powerful computer models.”

Staff at the state meteorological service have been fighting since 2008 against plans to eliminate 500 posts and close half of their offices in the localities, part of the government’s austerity programme of cuts in public spending to compensate for the billions that have been handed over to France’s leading finance houses.



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