

Deadly storms, flooding hit US mid-South

Jerry White
4 May 2010

Weekend storms and tornados triggered flash flooding throughout several mid-southern states, leaving at least 22 people dead in Tennessee, Kentucky and Mississippi. Some of the most serious damage was in Tennessee's second largest city, Nashville, where the Cumberland River was expected to crest Monday night at more than 12 feet above flood level.

Eleven of the twelve people killed in Tennessee drowned, including six in Nashville. One other state resident was killed by a tornado in the western part of the state. Officials fear more bodies will be found once the floodwaters recede.

The torrential rains caught state officials off guard. Tennessee Governor Phil Bredesen called it an "unprecedented rain event," and dispatched National Guard troops around the state.

In the Nashville metropolitan area—home to nearly 1.6 million people—more than 13 inches of rain fell over two days. This was nearly double the previous record of 6.68 inches, set at the time of Hurricane Fredrick in 1979. Flooding was the worst since the 1960s, before a system of flood-control dams was built to control the Cumberland River.

On Monday, muddy water continued to flow into neighborhoods. A leaking levee sent water into the historic downtown area, closing businesses and schools and forcing thousands to retreat into 20 emergency shelters. The Music City's most famous landmark, the Grand Ole Opry House, was flooded with several feet of water.

One of two of the city's sewage treatment plants is underwater, prompting Mayor Karl Dean to ask residents to cut their water use in half by using it only for drinking and cooking.

The rain ended Monday, but there will likely be weeks of cleanup, the Associated Press reported. Thousands of homes have been damaged or destroyed by flooding and tornados. Emily Petro of the Red Cross

in Nashville told the AP that her agency is sheltering about 2,000 people across Tennessee, with about 1,200 of them in Nashville. Approximately 14,000 homes and businesses are without power.

The three major interstates in the Nashville area were closed over the weekend. Interstate 40, which runs east to west through Tennessee, reopened Monday. A video posted on YouTube shows a home floating down one highway past abandoned vehicles. Another widely-viewed video provides some stark footage of the floods.

As is regularly the case in such disasters, the most vulnerable were the hardest hit, in particular low-income families that live in trailer homes. Over 100,000 people—or 17.5 percent of the population—live below the official poverty line in Nashville.

An AP report on rescue efforts in a trailer park noted, "Firefighters busted through the windows of Audrey Talley's trailer early Sunday to rescue her family, including her three small grandchildren, ages 9 months to 4 years old. Talley's son woke her to tell her water was coming into the south Nashville residence. Within 10 minutes it was knee deep."

"We've lost everything," the 47-year-old Talley said at an emergency shelter at Lipscomb University. "I don't know what we're going to do. We've got nowhere to go."

The flooding also displaced several dozen homeless people who live in a tent city under a bridge on the Cumberland River. A man who gave his name as John El said he had lived among the tents in a house made of planks. "My house just took a float down the Cumberland," he told reporters.

Storms also caused flash flooding in Memphis, the state's largest city of 680,000 residents. A power outage at the Bayou Gayoso Pumping Station, which pumps wastewater through a force main under the Wolf River, resulted in sewage overflowing many manholes, Public Works director Dwan Gilliom told the AP.

Thousands of customers of the Memphis Light, Gas and Water Division remained without power.

Even before the disaster Memphis had the distinction of being the hunger capital of America. According to a Gallup poll released last month, 26 percent of Memphis residents said that at some point in the past 12 months they could not afford enough food. The economic damage and dislocation caused by the flooding will only exacerbate this social crisis.

There is little doubt that the state's underfunded and decaying infrastructure contributed to the disaster. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, 21 percent of the state's bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete; there are 148 high hazard dams in Tennessee—dams whose failure would cause a loss of life and significant property damage. The ASCE says Tennessee's drinking water infrastructure needs an investment of \$2.77 billion over the next 20 years.

Obama's stimulus package did nothing to address the infrastructure needs of the state. During the New Deal of the 1930s, Tennessee was the site of a major government construction effort; the Tennessee Valley Authority built dams and brought electrification to the region's cities and rural areas.

Residents of nearby states have also died in the extreme weather. Six people have been killed in Mississippi and four in Kentucky. The AP reported that three of those killed in Mississippi died when high winds, believed to be tornados, hit their homes. The other three were killed in what authorities said were weather-related traffic accidents. Four weather-related deaths were also reported in Kentucky, including one man whose truck ran off the road and into a flooded creek.

In Kentucky, where storms dumped at least 9 inches of rain during the weekend, 23 counties and 8 cities declared states of emergency. Schools were closed Monday in several counties. Officials reported that more than 300 roads have been blocked by floodwaters. The rain sent water over the top of an earthen dam at Dunham Lake in Edmonton on Sunday. This led to evacuations out of fears that the dam might break, according to a report in the *Lexington Herald-Leader*.

In Richmond, Kentucky, state police stated that Carl D. Rogers, 65, died at his home, despite the arrival of rescue teams. Rogers' home was surrounded by water,

authorities said, but rescuers were unable to reach him because of waist-high water and a strong electrical current. He fell into the water and is believed to have died from electrocution.

Also hard hit was Pike County, the state's largest coal mining area, which borders West Virginia on the eastern side. Weekend storms hit Belfry and Williamson, in particular. Thousands of residents of the area and surrounding hollows were left without drinking water. The National Guard was dispatched to the region and police officials warned against the looting of homes of residents forced to take shelter in emergency facilities.

The area has repeatedly been hit by devastating flooding, which has been made worse by a poor flood-control system, mountain top removal and other environmentally destructive activities of coal companies.

The weekend deaths in Tennessee, Kentucky and Mississippi come on the heels of a tornado in Arkansas on Friday that killed a woman and injured about two dozen people. A week ago, ten people were killed by a tornado from a separate storm in western Mississippi.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact