

Tornadoes kill at least 290 in US South

Naomi Spencer
29 April 2011

Over 290 people were killed after dozens of huge tornadoes tore through the Deep South of the US April 28. Hundreds more were injured and many victims remain trapped in rubble.

It is the worst tornado disaster in the United States in 40 years.

Alabama was hardest hit, reporting 184 deaths. The Alabama Hospital Association reports that it has treated 1,500 injured patients in storm-affected areas as of Thursday.

Mississippi and Tennessee each reported 33 deaths. In Georgia, the death toll reached 14, although the state's emergency management agency stated that several mobile home parks sustained significant damage. Eight others were killed in Virginia, and one died in Kentucky.

The damage is still being assessed and the death toll is expected to rise. According to Alabama Emergency Management Agency information manager Yasamie August, "It's going to be difficult to get an accurate count of damage or injuries at this point. Many people can't get to a hospital."

Local reports describe entire neighborhoods obliterated. Thousands of residents have lost their homes, cars and personal belongings. As many as 1 million Alabama residents were without power Thursday, and damaged areas are reporting water shortages.

Some 160 tornadoes were reported in the system, which stretched from Mississippi to New York state. It follows another severe system responsible for killing dozens in Arkansas and Mississippi only days before. (See "More violent storms kill seven in Arkansas") More than 350 have been killed in violent storms and flash flooding across the region in the past month. A vast area of the Midwest and mid-South remains under a flash flood watch.

In the city of Tuscaloosa, Alabama (home to the University of Alabama), a tornado estimated to be as large as a mile in diameter destroyed a five-mile-long swath of the city's southeast side Wednesday afternoon. At least 36 city residents were killed, 600 were injured, and many are still missing. Tuscaloosa Mayor Walter Maddox described the aftermath as "utter destruction." "We have neighborhoods that have been basically removed from the map," he told the press.

The National Weather Service estimates the tornado may have been an EF5, the highest category, with winds exceeding 200 miles per hour. Video footage of the tornado shows it to be an immense black column filled with debris (see here, here, and here). By some media accounts, the tornado remained on the ground for more than two hours (and moved across some 16 miles). If accurate, this would make the cell the longest-lived tornado ever recorded.

Tuscaloosa's emergency management facility was destroyed, compounding rescue operations. Emergency crews are now using the University of Alabama stadium as an operations center.

Firsthand accounts paint a harrowing and chaotic scene. The *Tuscaloosa News* reported muffled screams could be heard from piles of debris where an apartment complex in the Alberta neighborhood had been. Rescuers and residents dug with their hands and used chainsaws and floor jacks to reach trapped residents. They were not able to free one trapped woman who couldn't feel her legs, the paper reported.

"Rosedale Court is gone. It looks like a war zone," one resident said of a large housing project in the Rosedale neighborhood. "It looks like three to four units are all that is left standing." City officials said Rosedale Court and other apartment complexes may still have residents trapped underneath.

One doctor who was working at Tuscaloosa's DCH Regional Medical Center when the tornado struck told the Associated Press that, walking back to his destroyed home, he pulled three students from the rubble of neighboring houses. One was dead and two were seriously injured, he said. Using scraps of debris as stretchers, he and other residents carried the wounded down to an ambulance. "We just did the best we could to get them out and get them stabilized and get them to help," he said. "I don't know what happened to them."

Officials in Birmingham's Jefferson County said residents were given only about 10 minutes' warning before the tornado struck. At least 14 people were killed, 100 were injured, and

1,000 homes were rendered “flattened and unlivable,” according to the county emergency management agency. The county was already on the brink of bankruptcy before the disaster struck and officials have stated they are dependent on federal recovery funds.

In Pleasant Grove, a working class suburb of Birmingham, the tornado struck abruptly. “It happened so fast it was unbelievable,” a retired firefighter commented to the AP. “They said the storm was in Tuscaloosa and it would be here in 15 minutes. And before I knew it, it was here.”

A local resident told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the sound of cries and screams filled the streets Wednesday night. Police departments in the area went in to assist, and were still digging people out of the rubble Thursday afternoon. Most of the trees lining the streets were blown down, hampering the passage of emergency vehicles. Roads leading into the area have been blocked off by police.

The *Tuscaloosa News* published on its blog a plea for help from one Pleasant Grove resident, who said residents “are unable to communicate with no power and spotty cell phone service. Many of them are still trapped in neighborhoods because the large debris is blocking the roads. There are definitely fatalities and people severely injured—still trapped in damaged homes.” Residents were without clean water.

After striking Pleasant Grove, the storm bore down on the distressed neighborhood of Pratt City, a former coalmining town. The Jefferson County emergency management office reported nearly complete devastation there, with the fire station damaged and many homes collapsed or gone. In addition, at least eight people were killed in the west Birmingham community of Concord.

In rural parts of northwestern Alabama, too, residents were unprepared for the scale of the storms. In Franklin County, where at least 25 died, rescue crews were searching for missing residents. Schools, water and sewer infrastructure, and many businesses were heavily damaged. One Franklin County resident noted, “People did take cover, they did take heed. And it was so bad that we still had the death toll we had.”

The severity of the storms was compounded by inadequate housing stock. Daniel, a Birmingham electrician who works in the construction industry, told the WSWS, “Most of the homes I’ve seen have no basement or storm shelter. A lot of new homes being built are called ‘cookie cutter homes’ because they are built as cheaply as possible.”

Because of this, even when storm sirens are sounded, residents may have nowhere to take shelter aside from their

bathrooms or closets. According to National Weather Service meteorologist Greg Carbin, “If you experienced a direct hit from one of these [tornadoes], you’d have to be in a reinforced room, storm shelter or underground” to survive.

Alabama Governor Robert Bentley declared a state of emergency on Wednesday, activating 1,400 National Guard soldiers, which he said would carry out searches and rescue operations.

Residents in hard-hit areas have reported that local police have been tasked with carrying out an enormous rescue operation. In blocking off damaged areas to protect properties and businesses from looting, police have also prevented volunteers from joining the efforts and residents from accessing their own properties.

Bentley has defended the state’s level of disaster preparedness, telling reporters Thursday, “We were very prepared ... but it was just the force of the storms... When a [tornado] hits a highly populated area like Tuscaloosa, you cannot move thousands of people in five minutes. When an F4 or F5 tornado hits, there’s not much you can do to change the outcome of that.” The governor complained that television and radio coverage of the approaching storms was “incessant,” keeping residents on alert to the point that they tired of it.

The Obama administration has also hastened to praise the response of the state and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) before federal recovery operations have even gotten underway. FEMA was supporting a “robust response effort” by local agencies, administration officials told the press Thursday. The emphasis on local response, as was established by the Bush administration in the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster, underlines the lack of response by the federal government to pressing rescue operations and catastrophic economic costs.

Obama will tour the devastated areas of Alabama on Friday, as a sidetrack to an already scheduled trip to the South. The president was slated to attend the space shuttle launch and deliver a graduation address in Florida.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact