

Mississippi towns submerged in floodwaters

Naomi Spencer
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Small towns along the Mississippi River are being inundated as cresting floodwaters flow south toward the Gulf of Mexico. Many residents in the worst hit areas along the river already face desperate poverty and lack flood insurance.

The crest has moved south from Memphis, Tennessee, where low-lying neighborhoods were flooded over the weekend, to the Delta region of northwest Mississippi. The area is an extensive floodplain between the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers with rich agricultural land and a population of just under half a million people. Authorities have estimated that some 5,000 Mississippians will need to evacuate.

Across the region, thousands of people have been forced to leave their homes and stand to lose everything to the floodwaters. Millions of acres of crops have been lost, and damage estimates are well into the billions of dollars.

Mississippi's Republican Governor Haley Barbour, while asserting that the levees would hold, urged residents to undertake voluntary evacuations from communities within the Delta. At a May 12 press conference, Barbour stated that the levees in the northern half of the state were "very much intact," although major devastation was expected in the southern portion, where the flood controls are a patchwork system of smaller and privately-maintained levees, some built to protect casinos.

"Backwater flooding in the south Delta is our major concern. The Yazoo backwater levee is expected to overtop," Barbour said. This levee is a four-mile section of the system north of Vicksburg. "For backwater [levee], water will sit until the Mississippi River has gone down by a very, very large amount." In the event of a failure of this levee, the governor stated, "west of the Will Whittington will rise to 107 feet. At such a level, Rolling Fork and Holly Bluff would go under water."

At Vicksburg, just south of the confluence of the Yazoo and Mississippi, 400 residents were told to evacuate immediately on Thursday, after county officials determined that the north-south highway US 61 would be cut off by flooding within hours.

Media coverage has been sparse, given many towns do not have local newspapers or television stations. However, the vulnerability of the population is clear from wire reports. "I really don't know what we're going to do," Sharonda Buck, an 18-year-old mother in Vicksburg told the AP. "We're trying to find somewhere to stay, that's all I know." The house in which Buck and 12 relatives lived had been surrounded by rising water since early in the week, and electricity was cut off Wednesday. She said they had spent Tuesday walking the railroad tracks in the flooded neighborhood.

In the unincorporated town of Tunica Cutoff south of Memphis, every home was flooded. The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* reported that the community was completely submerged in water measuring 40 feet deep in some places. Because of new housing codes that require houses be built above the "100-year flood" plain, the cost of recovery may signal the end of the town. Most residents of the town had no flood insurance. Many dwellings were little more than long-term campsites with trailers and campers.

Tunica County, population 10,000, faces an economic collapse that carries a major consequence for the state budget. Several casinos located in the county have shut down indefinitely, halting \$10 million per month in local and state tax revenue. Some 9,300 workers have been made jobless from the flooding in the area.

The economic toll will be severe statewide. Some 600,000 acres of crops in the area will be swept away, and the area's farm-raised catfish industry may also be wiped out.

In Rena Lara, Mississippi, population 500, hundreds of people evacuated as the water level broke its previous record, set in 1927. Local authorities were struggling to reinforce the levee Thursday. "It's getting scary," a long-time resident living below the levee told the AP. "They won't let you go up there to look at the water."

In Greenville, an unemployed resident in a public housing project with no means of transportation told the AP, "I got a baby and my mama. I don't know what we'd

do about food and clothes and stuff.”

In Roseville, local authorities sought to reassure residents at a public forum Wednesday night. The Arkansas River there measured 51.5 feet on Tuesday, 14 feet above flood stage. The tributary is projected to rise another two feet by May 15. The Bolivar County *Commercial* newspaper quoted multiple Roseville and county officials asserting that reports of flooded homes—shown on national television news programming—were “rumors.” Residents’ reports of a sand boil—a seepage of water under a levee—were also dismissed by the county’s Emergency Management Agency director.

According to the *Delta Farm Press*, the Mississippi Levee Board and US Army Corps of Engineers requested Bolivar County assistance in fighting growing sand boils Monday night. The county put 22 jail inmates on sandbagging detail at the site, the local paper reported. Levee Board member Peter Nimrod characterized the boil as a serious cause for concern because it contained brown material, which may have come from the main levee.

During an inspection earlier in the week, the Army Corps found the Yazoo backwater levee ranged from one to 11 inches lower than it was needed to be in places, suggesting that it is vulnerable to erosion.

If a levee gives way, an incalculably graver catastrophe may unfold across the region. John Barry, author of “Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America”, warned that a levee failure south of Memphis “will look like 1927.” In comments to the Associated Press Thursday, Barry noted, “Once you open it, you cannot close it. The amount of pressure will be insurmountable.”

The 1927 floods were the worst flood disaster in US history, killing 1,000 and leaving 600,000 homeless. At that time, the floodplains were far less populated than today.

Those who live in the most flood-prone areas have the least means to recover from the disaster. The Federal Emergency Management Agency announced that its response would not include grants for those whose homes have been ruined but were not covered by flood insurance. Instead, the Obama administration has said that homeowners who want to rebuild must apply for loans from the government.

Mississippi ranks last among US states on many indices of poverty and social conditions in the American Human Development Index, and averages a score that is half that of the top-ranked Connecticut. Close behind are other southern states including Louisiana and Alabama.

In the Delta region, life expectancy, earnings, and overall social conditions are even lower than in the Deep South as a whole. The population along the river suffers a poverty rate of 38 percent, with residents on average earning less than \$19,000 per year. Overall, the Delta region has a lower standard of living than the US in the early 1960s.

Masses of working people, and particularly the poor, are exposed to the crisis. Further south in Louisiana, small towns and urban centers alike are threatened with inundation in the coming week. The Army Corps has asked permission from the state to open the upstate Morganza Floodway along with two other spillways in order to protect Baton Rouge and New Orleans. The release, an action without precedent, would sweep through millions of acres of farmland and leave at least 2,500 residents flooded.

If the floodway is not opened, the levee system in New Orleans could give way. This would result in the submersion of entire parishes—many of them still struggling to recover from the flooding of Hurricane Katrina in 2005—in 25 feet of water. “If the river begins to fall rapidly, we could have incidents where saturated levees slide into the river,” Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East director Bob Turner told the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* Tuesday.

This risk assessment underscores the utter failure of the federal government to maintain the country’s water control system, or to oversee the strengthening of the city’s defenses in the aftermath of one of the worst disasters in US history.



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