

Tornadoes kill 12 in US Midwest, South

Naomi Spencer
2 March 2012

At least 12 people were killed and hundreds injured after a series of violent storms tore through the central US Wednesday. Several small towns were virtually demolished by tornadoes in the early morning hours.

The National Weather Service (NWS) reported that as many as 35 tornadoes touched down in the span of 24 hours in Nebraska, Kansas, southern Missouri and Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

Worst hit was Harrisburg, Illinois, a small, economically impoverished town in the southern tip of the state. Six residents were confirmed dead as of Thursday morning, and at least 100 more were reported injured, many gravely so. The local hospital sustained damage, impeding efforts to treat the wounded and care for other patients.

The tornado cut a 200-yard-wide swath through town, hitting residential neighborhoods and an apartment complex. Some 300 homes were damaged or destroyed, and power was cut off to half the town.

The storm struck before dawn on Wednesday, bearing winds of 170 miles per hour. Warning sirens went off, but officials said some of the victims may not have awoken to the alarms.

Interviews with survivors indicate that some of those who did wake did not have time to reach shelter. "I was barely awake," 62-year-old Harrisburg resident Diana Turner told the *New York Times*. She said she got out of bed and was instantly buried in debris inside her trailer. "I just kept hollering, and I could hear my husband hollering from where he was buried. I finally felt some air rushing in, and crawled toward that. I don't know how I got out." The Turners' home had been flung into a treetop by the powerful winds.

The coroner for Harrisburg's Saline County told the *Southern Illinoisan* newspaper that most of the town's six deaths occurred in a duplex complex behind a strip mall near the Wal-Mart Supercenter, in the oldest area of the historic coal mining town. The twister narrowly

missed an assisted living facility and nursing home.

Five of the six victims lived on Brady Street, where seven of ten apartment buildings were destroyed. Describing the scene, a *Chicago Tribune* correspondent noted that "four duplexes simply disappeared, blown off their foundations and disintegrating into the path of debris that stretched across the neighborhood." "I can't believe the measure of damage it did to this building," a resident told ABC News. "I'm just glad it happened at night and no one was at work."

Harveyville, Kansas, a town of 240, received no warning at all before experiencing a direct hit from an EF-2 tornado Tuesday night. Approximately half the town was destroyed by 120-mile-per-hour winds, and one man was killed. NWS meteorologists said that the volatility of the storm system produced rotations so quickly that some of the tornadoes, including the Harveyville twister, had formed and dissipated again within three minutes.

As the 2012 spring storm season begins, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has announced it will seek "efficiencies" in its new budget request, including consolidating field offices and setting up "virtual" offices instead of actually deploying to the sites of disasters. In a statement Thursday, FEMA deputy administrator Richard Serino noted that the White House has requested \$10 billion in discretionary spending for disaster response. The figure is 6 percent, or \$641.5 million, less than last year.

At the state level, emergency budgets have been buffeted by the economic crisis and repeated environmental disasters. Many local municipalities have been financially exhausted by historic floods and storms, which have tapped emergency assistance funds and destroyed the tax base.

Last year, at least 550 people were killed by tornadoes across the Midwest and South, making 2011's the deadliest tornado season in 75 years. In

April, tornadoes claimed 322 lives, most in Alabama. The following month, 180 more died from tornadoes, including at least 160 in Joplin, Missouri. Year after year, communities are decimated by storms in the Midwest. Flimsy housing, lack of public shelters, and inadequate emergency response funding continue to plague the region.

A trailer park in Buffalo, Missouri sustained a direct hit just after midnight Wednesday. One person was killed and 13 others were injured. “It looks more like a war zone than a tornado path,” a police officer commented. Two deaths were also reported in Cassville and Puxico, Missouri.

The tourism district of Branson, Missouri was struck around 2 a.m. by a twister some 400 yards across; 37 injuries were reported there. The storm went “bouncing from business to business to business—tens if not hundreds of millions in property damage,” Missouri Governor Jay Nixon told NBC. A witness to the Branson disaster told Associated Press, “Every time the tornado hit a building, you could see it exploding.”

Three Tennessee residents were killed as the system moved further eastward. Extensive damage was reported in eastern Tennessee and Kentucky.

The NWS’s Storm Prediction Center projects that a new system of storms will bring more potential tornadoes through the region on Friday. The cities of Indianapolis, Louisville, Cincinnati, Nashville, and Birmingham are under advisory for tornadoes, straight-line winds, and hail.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact