

Tornadoes rip through northern Texas

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On Wednesday, May 15, 10 tornadoes tore through the ground of north central Texas leaving at least six people dead and dozens wounded. Seven people remain missing, and hundreds have been left homeless. The violent spring storm scattered bodies, flattened homes, and threw trailers into cars.

The most devastating effects were felt in a subdivision in Granbury, a town of about 8,000 located 65 miles southwest of the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Roger Deeds, the local sheriff in Hood County, related that a thunderstorm spawned a tornado at 8:00 p.m. that leveled several mobile homes and single-family houses.

“Most of the neighborhood is heavily damaged to destroyed. Very little is untouched,” Deeds told a press conference Thursday morning. One resident described fist-sized hail which accompanied the twister.

While six people were confirmed dead at the time of his press conference, Deeds warned that the death toll could rise as rescue teams continue to search for survivors. All of the dead were residents of the Rancho Brazos Estates subdivision. Reportedly, some bodies were found in houses, but others were found nowhere near their homes, pushing rescuers to scour the surrounding areas for missing people.

The subdivision had 110 homes, and over the past five years about 60 of the units had been built by Habitat for Humanity, a program that enables poor, disabled, and single parent families to buy homes on low incomes. The homes were built with “sweat equity” on the part of the homeowners, who contributed their labor as part of the contracts. Many of the residents had no insurance.

Deeds related that 37 people were treated at a local hospital and that 15 others, including two in critical condition, were transported to hospitals in Fort Worth. About 50 people gathered in a local elementary school after nightfall to have their injured children examined

by paramedics. Up to 100 were injured in the devastation.

Meanwhile, emergency teams rushed 18 bulldozers into the area to clear a way for rescue teams to begin searching for survivors trapped under debris. The sheriff also informed reporters that 250 people, now homeless, had been evacuated from the area, many by bus.

Piles of planks and rubble, ripped apart mobile homes, mangled trees and other debris fill the area where the subdivision had been. Deeds estimated that about 75 homes have been completely destroyed.

According to the National Weather Service in Fort Worth, as many as 10 tornadoes touched down in northeastern Texas on Wednesday night. A Weather Channel meteorologist speculated that one of the tornados likely produced winds of up to 200 mph.

Another tornado reportedly grew to be as wide as one mile in diameter, hitting Cleburne, a courthouse city of about 30,000. No fatalities have been reported there. However, Cleburne Mayor Scott Gainm has reported the injury of seven people and the destruction of dozens of homes. In one neighborhood, a trucking company trailer was lifted and dropped onto a nearby car and garage.

A tornado also hit the small town of Millsap, located 40 miles west of Fort Worth. Roof damage of several houses was reported there in addition to a destroyed barn. Other tornados were spotted near Decatur and Weatherford. Tens of thousands of residences and businesses remain without power across the region.

The stories coming from survivors suggest that no adequate shelter was available for residents during the onset of the violent storm. One resident, Elizabeth Tovar, explained that she and her family were forced to huddle in their bathtub as glass shattered and their ceiling was lifted away from the structure of their dwelling.

The story is a common one. In touring the wreckage Thursday, Hood County Commissioner Steve Berry asked reporters, “Where do you hide if you’re living here? How do you take cover there? There’s nothing. There’s no hiding. This tornado was a monster.”

Elizabeth Tovar’s cousin, 32-year-old Jose Tovar, died in a mobile home in the subdivision. The force of the storm threw everyone outside of the flimsy dwelling.

Granbury resident Amanda Hernandez told the Forth Worth *Star-Telegram* that as a tornado approached the Rancho Brazos Estates subdivision, she took her three children and huddled in a closet. When they emerged, Hernandez described a path of destruction 100 yards wide and a mile long. “You could see across where houses were supposed to be,” she said. “Lots of people were bleeding. Some of them were hurt pretty bad.”

“We didn’t have insurance,” Hernandez explained. “I don’t know what we’re going to do.”

Most residents will not be able to easily pick up their lives and move forward. Hundreds find themselves homeless, with their livelihoods in shambles. One resident reported that he had a run a business out of his residence, but that nothing was left.

Many of the first responders in the aftermath of the storms were the residents themselves. Paul Justice told the *Star-Telegram*, “People were walking around dazed, covered with dirt and debris. I saw two ladies bundled up. One couldn’t walk, so we put her into a pickup. They were going to try to get her to a hospital.”

Arlena Sherman and Allacia Jerry, also residents of the subdivision, described searching for friends after the disaster. “We haven’t found them,” Jenny told the *Star-Telegram*. “We don’t know where they are. We’ve called hospitals. We’ve called friends. We just can’t find them.”

Katrina King huddled in a closet with her two children and their dogs. When they emerged, she told the *Dallas Morning News*, they wandered into a “fog of gasoline. That’s all we could smell,” she said. “Everywhere there was twisted metal, people around us were screaming, injured. Disaster.” She found an injured neighbor on the ground, crying and gripping her partially severed foot. She described how she stopped and “reflexively tried to help her re-attach it.”

The only reported shelter is being provided by Red Cross, leaving the survivors no choice but to seek aid

from religious groups. Jeff Watson, a disaster relief coordinator with the Red Cross, expressed being overwhelmed with need. “People are just up to their eyeballs in trouble,” he said. “We’re trying to help them as best we can.”

Woefully underfunded government agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency have little help to offer citizens whose lives have been destroyed. Indeed, thousands of survivors of tornadoes that ravaged the South and Midwest over the past few years have still not seen adequate government aid to help them rebuild their lives, despite the pledges of politicians at the state and federal levels.

Texas Governor Rick Perry issued a written statement Thursday expressing sadness for the deaths and predictably praising the local emergency crews who are bearing the full burden of the rescue efforts. “I commend our first responders, who do everything in their power to minimize the damage and care for the wounded,” Perry said. “The thoughts of 26 million Texans are with those suffering today, along with our prayers for a quick and full recovery for those still hospitalized, and for this community as a whole.”



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