

Devastating tornado kills dozens in Oklahoma City

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On Monday afternoon, a massive tornado struck Moore, Oklahoma, a suburb of Oklahoma City, leaving behind a mile-wide swath of devastation. As of this writing, 24 people have been confirmed dead, many of them children from an elementary school that was in the path of the storm.

Many remain missing, including an unknown number of children in the elementary school. At least 120 residents are being treated at area hospitals.

The tornado was estimated to be a category of either EF4 or EF5, with winds in excess of 200 miles per hour. News helicopter flyovers and video images taken by survivors show drifts of splintered housing materials and mangled cars for as far as the eye can see.

“People are trapped. You are going to see the devastation for days to come,” stated Betsy Randolph, a spokeswoman for the Oklahoma Highway Patrol speaking to CNN Monday afternoon. Some 171,000 people lived in the path of the twister.

The Plaza Towers Elementary School was completely flattened by the tornado, with an as yet unknown number of casualties. Children had been sheltered in the school in an attempt to protect them from the powerful storm. The Briarwood Elementary School was also severely damaged. By late evening, all Briarwood students had reportedly been accounted for.

The second floor of the Moore Medical Center was ripped off as it took a direct hit. “It looks like we have lost our hospital. I drove by there a while ago and it’s pretty much destroyed,” Moore Mayor Glenn Lewis told the press. “The whole city looks like a debris field.”

Other local hospitals struggled to admit the crush of wounded patients. “They are coming in minute by minute,” Integris Southwest Medical Center spokeswoman Brooke Cayot told Reuters.

“It seems that our worst fears have happened today,” said Bill Bunting, National Weather Service meteorologist in Norman, Oklahoma.

Emergency responders rushed to the multiple scenes of devastation to search through the debris for survivors. The National Guard was also activated to respond to the disaster.

Hundreds of homes and automobiles were destroyed while at least 7,000 customers were left without power in the Oklahoma City area. Interstate 35, which passes through Moore, was closed due to debris scattered on the roadway. All the roadways in the area are reportedly snarled with wreckage, and travelers are stranded in traffic backups.

Speaking Monday night in Washington, Oklahoma Representative Jim Brindenstine said, “At this time we don’t know the full extent of the damage and the potential human toll, but we are inspired. We are inspired by those who are sparing no effort to assist their neighbors and even many people that they don’t know.” President Barack Obama pledged federal support.

Disasters such as tornados—annual occurrences in the United States—require an enormous mobilization of social resources to properly respond to the destruction and human need. In every case, however, communities are left to fend for themselves. Politicians put in their appearances, invoke religion, and promise aid that never materializes. Emergency responders and ordinary citizens, responsible for shouldering the bulk of the rescue and recovery efforts, are offered hollow praise for their “resilience” and independent spirit.

Despite knowledge of the inherent dangers of tornados, many residents are still left completely without any protection from the high winds and flying debris. There are no systematic tornado safety

structures. Especially vulnerable are those who live in trailer parks which are composed of cheap materials incapable of resisting excessive winds and flying debris.

Moore is in the heart of the US's so-called Tornado Alley and has been repeatedly hit by powerful tornados over the past 15 years: October 4th, 1998; May 3rd, 1999; May 8th, 2003 and May 10th, 2010. The tornado that struck Moore in 1999 was the strongest tornado ever recorded, with wind speeds reaching 318 miles per hour. Thirty-six people were killed, and there was \$1 billion in damage. It was the deadliest and most destructive tornado in US history until the tornados that struck Joplin, Missouri and Tuscaloosa, Alabama in 2011.

The Moore tornado was one of numerous others spawned by a cold front moving through the region. High winds toppled trees, downing power lines and smashing cars and homes throughout the Midwest. More than two dozen tornados were spotted during the day in Iowa, Oklahoma, Kansas and Illinois.

Monday's storms came on the heels of violent weather the previous evening. On Sunday, a strong storm with high winds and large hail killed two men in their 70s. One fatality occurred at a trailer park in Bethel Acres near Oklahoma City, another fatality occurred when a trailer park was destroyed in Shawnee, Oklahoma. Thirty nine people were injured as the storms destroyed many homes and scattered debris.

The United States is currently experiencing the height of tornado season. Severe tornado activity is not unusual this time of year in Oklahoma and the other Plains states. Last week, tornadoes tore through north-central Texas leaving at least six people dead and dozens wounded. (See: "Tornadoes rip through North Texas").

At least 60 million people live in the path of the storm system that is moving across the Midwest, according to the National Weather Service. In towns throughout the country's midsection, masses of people live in poverty, in substandard housing, without storm shelters or insurance to rebuild.



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