

Tornadoes cut a path of destruction across Southeast US

Nick Barrickman
29 April 2014

On Sunday, a powerful storm system tore through the south-central region of the United States, producing tornadoes that killed an estimated 18 people and injured more than 100. The storm system produced more than 30 individual tornadoes, affecting a number of states, including Oklahoma, Iowa, Nebraska, Arkansas and Kansas.

Sixteen were killed in Arkansas when a powerful tornado cut an 80-mile swath through the state, striking suburban areas just north of Little Rock, the state's capital. As of Monday morning more than 10,000 were without power in the state. Forecasters predicted that more storms were on their way to the battered region.

Parts of Mississippi braced for another outbreak of tornadoes on Monday, as most of the state was under at least a tornado watch, and parts of northern Mississippi were under a tornado warning, a more urgent advisory. A severe weather advisory was also issued for parts of Louisiana, Alabama and Tennessee as well. More tornado activity was expected into the evening.

In Kansas, one person was reported dead after a tornado touched down on Sunday, destroying over 70 homes and 25 businesses in the town of Baxter Springs, near the Kansas-Missouri border. Another 34 people were reported injured in the event. Two days earlier, an 11-month-old infant in North Carolina was killed when the roof of his family's home caved in during a storm.

Speaking at a press conference, Arkansas Governor Mike Beebe told reporters, "We don't have a count on injuries or missing. We're trying to get a handle on the missing part... Just looking at the damage, this may be one of the strongest we have seen." Beebe declared the region a disaster area, ordering National Guard troops to Faulkner, Pulaski and White counties, where the majority of the damage occurred.

"I can't even get down the main street down to the

middle of town," said James Firestone, mayor of Vilonia, one of the areas hit by the storms. "I am trying to make my way through the downed trees and power lines. What I am seeing, it is a lot of damage," he continued, adding, "I've been listening to the rescue folks. They're saying people have to be extracted from vehicles.... It looks pretty bad. From what I understand, there has been a subdivision that's been leveled."

Karla Ault, a high school volleyball coach in Vilonia, Arkansas told NPR news that her home had been completely destroyed by the storm. "I'm just kind of numb. It's just shock that you lost everything. You don't understand everything you have until you realize that all I've got now is just what I have on," she said.

Tweets from the National Weather Service said that the tornado that touched down in northern Arkansas was nearly "a half-mile wide" in diameter, with winds over 160 miles per hour, qualifying it as the most powerful tornado recorded thus far this year.

In perfunctory remarks, President Obama stated that, "Your country will be there to help you recover and rebuild, as long as it takes." Obama is currently in the Philippines, where he is conducting a tour of US allies in the Asia-Pacific.

Far from this being an unexpected event, the region damaged by the most recent storms is located inside Tornado Alley, an area known for its volatile weather patterns. The event comes three years to the day after a massive storm system ravaged parts of the central and southeastern United States, killing a total of 316 people. In one town—Joplin, Missouri—over 160 people were killed when an F-5 tornado touched down nearby. The town of Baxter Springs is just across the state line from Joplin. Nearly a year ago, in Moore, Oklahoma, another powerful storm system took the lives of more than two-dozen people, including many children, as

well as injuring more than 240 others.

Rather than ramping up the amount of adequate protection and relief to residents of this region, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has seen a drastic paring back of its budget in recent years. The set of automatic budget cuts known as the federal “sequester,” which went into effect last year after being agreed to by Obama and Congress, slashed about \$1 billion from FEMA, affecting critical areas such as funds for weather forecasting centers, among other services.

An additional \$1.9 billion was also cut from other disaster relief programs, such as transportation repair. Finally, the sequester cut 7 percent from the budget of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which oversees the National Hurricane Center and the National Weather Service.



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