

Winter storms kill dozens across US South and Midwest

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Severe weather over a wide section of the United States led to more than 40 deaths over the Christmas holiday. Powerful storms spawned flooding, tornadoes and blizzard conditions across the US South and Midwest, fueled by a huge east-west temperature contrast.

In Texas, tornadoes killed at least 11 people near Dallas. The strongest storm, a category EF4 tornado, destroyed parts of Garland, and another storm pounded nearby Rowlett. Both communities are northeast of Dallas. The storms were among the most powerful ever to hit the area in December. It is the deadliest December for tornadoes since 1953.

Five of the deaths were reported when high winds tossed cars off an interstate freeway overpass onto traffic below. As many as 600 homes were damaged in Rowlett.

As is generally the case in such disasters, hardest hit were working class communities where less well constructed homes as well as trailers were flattened. The storms in Texas destroyed a recreation vehicle park as well as an apartment building. In Rowlett, three homes collapsed. A number of residents of the RV park were injured and taken to hospitals.

In the city of Sunnyvale east of Dallas, a mobile home park was set ablaze after being struck by high winds. Nearby roads were shut due to debris, and the damage to the homes is thought to be extensive.

Compounding the death and destruction, apparently no tornado warnings sounded before the storms hit.

The storms in the US are part of a series of extreme weather events worldwide, including ongoing floods in northern England and Paraguay. The US storms have been attributed to a regular weather pattern known as El Niño, but scientists have also pointed to the connection between extreme events and global warming.

The winter has been exceptionally warm in the US, creating the conditions for tornadoes that usually strike in the spring and summer. In the UK, December temperatures are far above previous records.

The devastation in eastern Texas followed a string of weather related disasters in the central US. In the western part of Texas a blizzard covered the panhandle area, a region encompassing some 26,000 square miles. Travel became almost impossible due to blowing and drifting snow, with many motorists trapped in their vehicles without food.

Meanwhile, Oklahoma reported blizzard conditions in the western part of the state and “disastrous” flooding in the east, where up to a foot of rain fell. The dire conditions prompted the governor to declare a state of emergency.

To the north, heavy rains caused flooding. In Illinois, three adults and two children drowned when their car was swept away by floodwaters. According to reports, the car drove into several feet of water and was carried downstream for about 200 feet where it became stuck and completely submerged.

Six flood deaths were also reported in Missouri. Among the dead were four international soldiers temporarily stationed at Fort Leonard Wood. They apparently drowned while trying to drive their vehicle across a flooded roadway.

The storms triggered widespread airline delays and cancellations, with 900 flights cancelled and more than 500 delayed through Monday.

Earlier, tornadoes in Mississippi killed eight people just before Christmas. Northern Mississippi suffered some of the worst damage due to a tornado with an unusually long track. If confirmed, its 150-mile track would be the longest for a December tornado in the region.

In middle Tennessee, storms impacted wide areas, killing six. Four storms hit just before Christmas Eve. High winds from a tornado in Summertown destroyed three homes and a shed and damaged at least seven others. Two people were injured.

One resident, Milton Steele, interviewed by the local media, said his trailer home was lifted up by the winds off its foundation and dropped on its side 20 feet away. “The wind suddenly picked up velocity and intensity then the trailer started shaking, it started moving. The whole world started going around,” Steele said.

Steele told reporters that he had no insurance on his home and was counting on the generosity of friends and neighbors to try to sort out his life. “I don’t know how I am going to come up with a place to live,” he told reporters.

Further north, the Detroit area saw its first recorded tornado in the month of December. The storm had a peak wind of 90 miles per hour and a maximum width of 300 feet. It travelled two miles near the western Detroit suburb of Canton and damaged an industrial park and numerous buildings and vehicles.

Some 150,000 homes across Michigan were without power in the wake of high winds that hit Christmas Eve. The winds, part of the same storm system that impacted areas of the Midwest and spawned the Canton tornado, overwhelmed the state’s antiquated private electrical grid, causing many tens of thousands to spend Christmas without power.

On Monday evening, the same region was hit by an ice storm. Even before the power outages, many Detroit-area homes are without basic utilities, including heat, due to shutoffs.

Over the past 10 years there have been an average of over 600 weather related fatalities in the US annually, including 110 from tornadoes and 71 from floods. The number of US tornado deaths has declined since the 1920s, but since the 1990s it has leveled off according to the National Severe Storms Laboratory in Norman Oklahoma. A factor it cites is the growth in the number of people living in mobile homes.

In the 1950s about 1 percent of US residents lived in trailers. Today that number is between 7 and 8 percent.

By some calculations, a person is 20 times more likely to die in a mobile home as a result of a hit by a tornado than in a foundation-built structure, and about 50 percent of tornado deaths in the US involve people

trapped in trailers. Metal from a mobile home can become a flying missile in a storm and can easily cut a person in two.

Hurricane Andrew, which struck Florida in 1992, destroyed 97 percent of all manufactured housing in Dade County, compared to just 11 percent of conventional homes. A tornado that hit in Lake County, Florida in 2007 killed 21 people, all living in mobile homes.

There is no safe place to go in a mobile home if a tornado hits. Mobile home shelters can provide some protection, but at a minimum cost of \$4,500 they are out of reach for many hard-pressed working class families.



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