

Dozens of fatalities during European cold snap

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Across Europe there have been many fatalities following extreme weather conditions, due to a “polar vortex” over the past month. The AFP news agency reported this week that more than 60 people have perished across the continent.

Among the lives claimed were those of rough sleepers and the homeless, whose numbers have rocketed due to cuts in government funding to vital support organisations.

Most deaths have occurred in Poland, with at least 29 fatalities. Many of the victims were rough sleepers. Four people died of hypothermia last Friday alone, according to the PAP news agency. The *Krakow Post* reported that the numbers of deaths increased in 2018, writing, “In comparison, 13 people froze to death in February 2017, and just four in February 2016.”

Deaths were reported in the UK (ten by March 2), Slovakia (seven), Czech Republic (six), Lithuania and France (five each), and Spain (three). Italy, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia reported two deaths each. At least one death was reported in the Netherlands, in Sweden, and in Norway.

In Spain, one of the three victims was a homeless man, who had been sleeping in an abandoned truck. In France, a homeless man died in an abandoned house in Lens of smoke inhalation, after lighting a fire to stay warm.

The horror stories continued in Scandinavia. An 84-year-old woman was found buried in snow in Denmark. The authorities reported that “she left her home Wednesday evening and was found Thursday in a park in Roskilde, west of Copenhagen.”

In the UK—where the cold weather front was dubbed the “Beast from the East”—a storm in its immediate aftermath compounded the crisis. The list of weather-related deaths included a 52-year-old homeless man,

known locally as Ben, found dead on February 27 in a tent in Retford, Lincolnshire. The body of a 75-year-old woman was found underneath a car near her home in Leeds, West Yorkshire, the same day. A care worker, Elaine McNeill, was found dead in the snow on February 28 in Glasgow. She had been walking to the homes of clients in the Milton area of the city when she collapsed on Kippen Street. In Kent, two died, as well as one in Devon and one in East Lothian, Scotland.

On March 2, several people died in car accidents in the north of England. The day before, a seven-year-old girl died after a car crashed into a house in Cornwall. Troops were called out in several areas to rescue trapped people, with a major rescue operation required in the county of Hampshire.

Across Britain, some 1,000 schools were forced to close, while hospitals cancelled non-urgent operations and appointments.

Up to 3,500 vehicles were stuck on motorways, leading to passengers having to sleep in their cars overnight. The effects were widespread, with people left stuck on trains for more than 15 hours. Some fire services were trapped in the heavy snow and refuse collections were cancelled by councils.

Tens of thousands of people were left without water in the UK, including 12,000 households in London, after water pipes burst when they thawed out. Thames Water was forced to distribute water to queues of people from a supermarket in Balham, south London. In Hampstead, north London, crates of water were driven to residential streets for distribution by Thames Water employees from their own cars.

Welsh Water reported that burst pipes affected 4,500 homes.

The situation was so severe that Severn Water had to request Jaguar Land Rover—one of the main auto

manufacturers in the UK—cease production at its Solihull car plant near Birmingham. This was so water supplies could be targeted to hospitals and schools. Production at the Cadbury’s Bourneville chocolate plant was also halted.

Even before the cold snap took place, many homeless people perished of exposure. In France, 11 people sleeping rough died in the six weeks between January 1 and February 12. The figures were compiled by the Les Morts dans la Rue group (Deaths in the Street). Across the greater Paris region of Ile-de-France, a total of 18 deaths took place in the same period.

The devastation wreaked by the cold weather in the UK, with its terrible human cost, took place despite the government being warned a month ago by the Meteorological Office’s chief long-range forecaster that a spell of extremely cold weather would arrive.

A lack of planning for energy demands was evident. On March 1, the UK’s National Grid issued a “gas deficit warning,” which resulted in gas prices reaching their highest level for more than two decades. No doubt this will be passed onto the consumer.

Peter Smith, the director of policy for the National Energy Action, a charity campaigning to end fuel poverty in Britain, said the recent extreme cold would likely see an average of as many as 100 people per day perishing in cold homes this winter. This compared with a five-year average of 80 people per day. Based on these figures, the final death tally in the UK could be more than 2,300.



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