

“We had several families that have probably lost everybody”

Tornado outbreak kills 23 in Alabama, wreaks havoc across southeastern US

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More than six tornadoes swept across the southeastern United States on Sunday, destroying thousands of structures and leaving 23 dead. Alabama, Georgia and the Florida Panhandle all suffered tornadoes, while the same storm system dumped hail on Louisiana and high winds reached from Mississippi to South Carolina.

Lee County, in eastern Alabama, incurred all the reported deaths as of this writing, which includes several children, one of them a 6-year-old. The National Weather Service reported that one of the tornadoes that touched down in the county—there were at least two—spanned a half-mile in width and unleashed winds 158 to 206 miles per hour.

County Sheriff Jay Jones described the wreckage in a press conference Monday morning in dire terms: “It looks almost as like [sic] someone took a giant knife and just scraped the ground. There are slabs where homes formerly stood ... Complete residences are gone ... Whole forested areas, trees are just snapped and lying on the ground.”

The “giant knife scrape” described by Jones lies in a rural stretch of Lee County along Highway 51, between the towns of Opelika to the north and Beauregard to the south, just a few miles east of Auburn University. The area hosts several mobile home parks, at least one of which appears to have been completely obliterated. Search crews composed of government officials and volunteers numbering between 100 and 200 looked for survivors Monday, assisted by infrared-sensing drones, which can identify human body heat.

Jones said he expected the death toll—23 at the time of the press conference—to rise as the number of people still unaccounted for stood in the double digits. The

East Alabama Medical Center in Opelika reported more than 60 patient intakes relating to the storm as of Sunday night.

“We had several families that have probably lost everybody in their whole family,” Bill Harris, the Lee County coroner, told CNN on Monday. Local news helicopter footage of the storm’s aftermath showed widespread and severe damage.

Where structures still exist in the area, many now lack electricity. Forecasts predict a snowstorm is headed for the area, posing another deadly threat to the most vulnerable residents.

In neighboring Georgia, Governor Brian Kemp declared a state of emergency Monday afternoon in three counties—Harris, Talbot and Grady. Between 2,000 and 3,000 homes in Georgia remain without power. Dozens of homes were damaged or destroyed. There have been 12 reported injuries in the state and no fatalities.

While specific details about the storm’s destruction continue to emerge from a chaotic situation, the facts to date follow a familiar pattern. To start, definite risks of natural disaster exist and are known to the government. Warnings come about impending danger. Then, as catastrophe strikes, local and federal governments respond with woeful inadequacy. A news cycle or perhaps two concerns itself with images and video footage of devastation and suffering. Politicians offer prayers and little else. Then, something like socio-political amnesia sets in, and a society run by wealthy oligarchs leaves the disaster victims to fend for themselves.

Within a few weeks, the cycle is begun anew with a different tragedy, out of the blue. No improvements are

made to infrastructure, no mass emergency planning is undertaken.

In the case of Sunday's deadly tornadoes, the danger was well known, given the spate of tornadoes in 2011 which killed more than 230 people in Alabama alone, or the tornados in January 2017 that killed 18 in Mississippi and Georgia.

While the National Weather Service and Lee County Emergency Management Agency (EMA) appear to have sounded the warnings for Sunday's tornadoes in time—including a text-message alert—the most vulnerable residents had no place to go. In fact, Lee County EMA's website informs citizens that they are on their own as far as tornado shelters, "A vehicle, trailer or mobile home does not provide good protection ... Plan to go quickly to a building with a strong foundation, if possible." A link about making a "Family Emergency Plan" leads to an error page.

The video and images of the destruction in Lee County make clear that the scope of the emergency rescue effort—involving 100-200 persons—is paltry. Undoubtedly, at least some people who could cling to life beneath the rubble will die preventable deaths from exposure, dehydration and the like.

Combining verbal clumsiness, cynicism and, of course, religion, president Trump tweeted late Sunday, "To the great people of Alabama and surrounding areas: Please be careful and safe. Tornadoes and storms were truly violent and more could be coming. To the families and friends of the victims, and to the injured, God bless you all!" This remark parallels his previous comments about the California wildfires and hurricanes Florence and Harvey.

Trump and the entire social order he oversees bear responsibility for every single injury and death in this and other such "natural" disasters. While some property damage may be inevitable, every injury and loss of life is a *social* crime. In each case, those deprived of safe housing, transportation and other basic necessities face financial and even physical destruction. Every dollar in tax cuts for billionaires, for foreign wars, for nuclear weapons, is a dollar stolen from the working class, a dollar that could have saved a life.

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