

Trump makes perfunctory trip to survey Alabama tornado recovery efforts

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President Donald Trump and the first lady made a brief two-and-a-half hour tour of Lee County, Alabama on Friday, before flying to his Mar-a-Lago, Florida, residence for the weekend.

A powerful storm system generated 38 tornadoes last Sunday across the Southeast, with several causing injury and destruction in Florida, Georgia and Alabama. Georgia Governor Brian Kemp declared a state of emergency in Grady, Harris and Talbot counties, where almost two dozen homes were destroyed and up to 40 damaged.

Lee County in the east-central part of Alabama, near Columbus, Georgia, suffered at least two tornadoes. One of these tornadoes was a category EF-4, meaning it had winds up to 170 miles per hour, stretching a full mile wide. This unusually powerful tornado—and the deadliest in the US since 2013—demolished almost everything in a square mile near the community of Beaugard. The EF-4 tornado traveled another 15 miles west and north into the town of Smiths Station, where it diminished into an EF-1 as it crossed the Chatahoochee River into Georgia.

The storm killed 23 Lee County residents. One family lost seven, another ten members. Others remain in local and regional hospitals.

Makitha Griffin told CNN that she lost five loved ones to the tornadoes—her aunts, Florel Tate Stenson, 63, and Tresia Robinson, 62; her uncles, Henry Lewis Stenson, 65, and Raymond Robinson Jr., 63; and her cousin, 38-year-old Eric Jamal Stenson. A cousin who was at the home of those killed during the storm sustained injuries and remains in the hospital.

Trump's visit to Lee County appears to have consisted largely of a helicopter overflight and briefings with local officials. Prior to arrival, the president tweeted several times about Sunday's

tornadoes, including the one on Monday:

FEMA has been told directly by me to give the A Plus treatment to the Great State of Alabama and the wonderful people who have been so devastated by the Tornadoes. @GovernorKayIvey, one of the best in our Country, has been so informed. She is working closely with FEMA (and me!).

Anyone familiar with Trump's handling of natural disasters—and that of the American ruling class more broadly—would understandably fear an “A Plus treatment” from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. After the recent California wildfires, Trump berated state officials and threatened to withhold recovery funding unless they adopted his bizarre “forest management” notions. In 2017, the federal government's response to Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico was notoriously callous and insufficient, as was the response to Hurricane Harvey, which swamped Houston, Texas, just weeks prior.

Some media coverage of the tornadoes has celebrated the advance warnings from meteorologists as a great success in saving lives, but this depiction is at best incomplete. While scientific knowledge, instrumentation and communications technology did arm residents with awareness of the storm's seriousness, the reports of tornadoes on the ground typically gave residents less than 10 minutes to find shelter.

By no fault of the forecasters—it is in the nature of tornadoes that they move rapidly—their warnings could only do so much good. For so many living in the rural stretch in the storm's path, the only option was to shelter in place. This included a large number of mobile home residents.

A *Washington Post* report on the Lee County tornadoes cites availability of suitable shelter as the

decisive factor in saving life and limb.

A single designated shelter serves this rural community of 10,000 . Even assuming that the residents had reliable transportation—and many of the poorest certainly did not—the short notice of impending disaster made safe and timely arrival unlikely, assuming there was still room inside.

The same report states that Lee County received a federal grant to encourage homeowners to build shelters with tax reimbursements following a series of tornadoes in 2011. The shelters can cost \$6,000, which homeowners initially pay out of pocket, being reimbursed 75 percent of the cost at a later time. Meanwhile, the median household income in Lee County is only \$45,000. A grant application for federal funds to build another community shelter remains unfulfilled.

On Friday, the Poarch Band of Creek Indians of Poarch, Alabama, posted a pledge on their Facebook page to pay \$184,000 toward funeral expenses of the deceased.

This and other contributions to relief agencies and various GoFundMe pages testify to the deeply felt compassion for the survivors. Such sentiments—entirely commendable—deserve political expression. Demands to compensate survivors and reintegrate them into social life, with safe housing, employment and medical care, would find overwhelming popular support. Proper shelter must be viewed as a social right and fought for so that loss of life from natural disaster can become a thing of the past.



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