

More than thirty dead as tornadoes rip across southeastern US

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Severe storms and tornadoes devastated several states in the Southeast over the weekend. Over 30 people have died across the region from the dozens of tornadoes which ravaged through Mississippi, South Carolina, and Georgia. The natural disaster comes as nationwide stay-at-home orders due to COVID-19 have left millions out of work and in precarious situations.

Over the course of about two days, 71 tornadoes were reported in nine different states across the South. Over a million homes lost power during the series of storms. Two days later, half a million people remain without power.

Hundreds of homes were destroyed as the tornadoes ripped through neighborhoods. Emergency crews were reportedly unable to reach many of the more devastated areas due to debris and damage to roads and bridges. Hundreds, if not thousands of people are now homeless, looking for refuge and therefore at greater risk of catching and spreading the virus.

According to reports, the tornadoes that hit Mississippi were particularly destructive, with the most powerful tornado being classified with the rare EF-4 rating with winds up to 170mph.

Strong gusts of wind, up to 80 mph in Georgia and Florida, along with deadly tornadoes, were also reported in those states. By Monday afternoon, tornado watches stretched as far north as Virginia and Washington DC, as well as parts of Maryland and Pennsylvania.

Southern Mississippi remains the hardest hit in the region with 11 reported deaths. Supercell thunderstorms arrived one after another on Sunday carving a path of destruction across several miles.

On Monday, Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves posted a series of tweets about the storms, the worst the state has seen in over a decade. Underscoring the

severity of the storms, he wrote: “We are used to tornadoes in Mississippi. No one is used to this,” the governor tweeted, “Winds topped 200 mph. The trail was long and devastating.”

Mississippi residents responded on Twitter by taking the governor to task for his failure to prepare properly for the COVID-19 pandemic, which some say exacerbated the impact of these already devastating storms.

“Tornado Emergencies,” a rare and more extreme weather warning issued when weather events merit a stronger response than the usual “Tornado Warning” designation, were also issued in Monroe, Louisiana; Chattanooga, Tennessee; and Walterboro, South Carolina.

Dozens have been injured across these impacted states whose hospitals are already flooded by COVID-19 patients.

In Georgia, at least eight people died as tornadoes tore through mobile home parks in Murray County and Bartow County.

Alexandra Vargas, a resident of Chatsworth, Georgia, described the scene as she got a tornado warning alert on her phone soon before the tornado coursed through her neighborhood. “It was like a train derailling,” Vargas said, describing the roar of the tornado, “Shook the entire house. And you could hear trees snapping and debris hitting the roof.”

In South Carolina, at least nine people were killed, including Jack Harvill, a 77-year-old security guard working at a BorgWarner auto parts production plant. Harvill, who was working security for the plant under the employment of American Security contractors, died from blunt force traumatic injuries when the building he was working in collapsed at around 3:30 a.m.

The causes of death for many in Mississippi and

South Carolina were the result of trees crashing into mobile homes. One woman in Alabama took to social media to describe the destruction in their neighborhood and the impact on her family: “The power was out for three days. We’ve probably lost several hundred dollars worth of food.” Countless others have also posted on Twitter about the setbacks experienced because of these storms. One person wrote: “Power loss = loss of everything in the freezer. People will be forced to start from scratch as grocery stores are already running out of food because of the pandemic.”

The chief of forecast operations at the National Weather Service’s Storm Prediction Center, Bill Bunting, told *New York Times* reporters, “Unfortunately, it has played out like we feared. All of the ingredients, all the conditions we look for when we’re forecasting tornadoes and strong tornadoes were in place.”

In Monroe, Louisiana, a large tornado ripped through several neighborhoods and a nearby airport, with wind gusts up to 65 mph. In a statement, the Monroe city mayor said that some 200-300 homes were destroyed.

In a video that went viral on Twitter, a resident describes the aftermath: “It just wiped out everything around me.” Natural disasters such as these are made incalculably worse because of the immense social crisis gripping the region. Decades of neglect and defunding have led to crumbling infrastructure and job losses, all exacerbated by the rampant lack of health services and a gutted health care system. Such events on top of a deadly pandemic ravaging the nation could prove catastrophic to the poor and working-class populations that get hit the hardest.



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