

Widespread destruction in US South after tornadoes touch down over the weekend

J. L'Heureau
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A storm system that developed earlier last week caused widespread damage and destruction in the southeast US over the weekend, with several rural communities in Mississippi being the hardest hit.

Two dozen tornadoes were reported in less than 24 hours in Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee, with 10 confirmed by the National Weather Service (NWS). Large swathes of social infrastructure have been obliterated, with dozens confirmed killed in Mississippi alone.

On Friday evening, an EF-4 tornado traveling at 50 miles per hour (80 kph) struck down in Rolling Fork, Mississippi, a small town 85 miles (137 km) northwest from Jackson in Sharkey County. The wind gusts of EF-4 tornadoes, based on the Enhanced Fujita Scale, range between 166 and 200 miles per hour (267 and 322 kph).

According to the NWS: “The scale divides tornadoes into six strengths, from zero to 5. Tornadoes that are intense enough to warrant an F4/EF4 or F5/EF5 rating are classified as ‘violent.’ Fortunately, these tornadoes are extremely rare, accounting for only about two percent of all tornadoes. But when they do strike, they inflict terrible suffering as homes and businesses are destroyed and, often, lives are lost.”

The last time an EF-4 tornado was reported in Mississippi was in April 2020.

From Rolling Fork, the tornado then traveled overnight northeast towards Huntsville in Alabama, pummeling multiple small towns in between. A second EF-3 tornado also struck down in Carroll and Montgomery counties in Mississippi, while an EF-2 landed in Fayetteville, Tennessee and three separate tornadoes impacted northern Alabama.

As of this writing, thirteen deaths have been reported in Sharkey County, Mississippi, two in Monroe County, three in Humphreys County, and three in Carroll County, making last weekend's tornado one of the top ten deadliest in Mississippi since 1950. In Morgan County,

Alabama, a 67-year-old man died from injuries sustained after he was rescued from his mobile home that was overturned by the storm.

At least 20 million people remained at risk from the impact of more severe storms yesterday in an area spanning the southern states up to the Midwest, with the NWS Storm Prediction Center's warning of “the possibility of a couple of strong tornadoes” in the same region impacted on Friday and Saturday being confirmed by a “large and extremely dangerous tornado” that struck south of LaGrange, Georgia on Sunday.

While the storm system continues to move eastward, the formation of another system was simultaneously anticipated to begin in Texas and move through Louisiana and Mississippi into Alabama. With reports of more than 150 tornadoes already confirmed so far this year, and with the tornado season's peak months (April through June) not yet reached on the calendar, many more deadly storms can be expected as spring weather heats up the air.

Last weekend's tornadoes were a part of a storm system that began in California early in the week. The system was so strong when it landed in the Bay Area that it became a “bomb cyclone” (a massive drop in pressure that increases a storm's strength), one that led to five deaths, and also spawned a rare tornado in Los Angeles.

From there it moved east along the flow of the jet stream, gaining energy in the process as a result of the unseasonably warm weather in multiple states from the southwest through to West Virginia. In some of these states, such as Arizona and Missouri, floods turned deadly, killing three and two, respectively.

The atmospheric ingredients for tornadoes became present as the fast-moving storm's upper wind shear combined with very warm air currents flowing northward from the Gulf of Mexico, with two tornadoes touching down in northeast Texas on Friday.

The NWS then began issuing tornado emergencies for

multiple towns in Mississippi, not long after which a massive wedged-shaped tornado of “extremely high-caliber” spawned in the west-central area of the state, according to Samuel Emmerson at the University of Oklahoma. AccuWeather reported that “wedge” tornadoes have tended to be “some of the largest and most destructive tornadoes in history.”

The factor of duration also played into the tornado’s destruction, as it was grounded for an hour over a southwest-to-northeast span of 170 miles (274 km). “That’s rare—very, very rare,” responded Lance Perrilloux, a meteorologist at the NWS.

But the main issue remained that of advanced notice and preparation. With barely any time to react, and the storm coming after nightfall, residents were left largely helpless and scrambling for shelter as the tornado knocked out power and leveled neighborhoods, workplaces and grocery stores in chaotic scenes reminiscent of the March 2020 tornado in Tennessee.

A first responder in Rolling Fork told AccuWeather, “Houses [were] completely demolished, businesses demolished ... pretty much most of the town is unrecognizable right now.” Leroy Smith Jr., a member of the Sharkey County Board of Supervisors, said, “Last night they had their houses. Today they don’t.”

The tornado knocked out power at Sharkey Issaquena Community Hospital in Rolling Fork, forcing patients to be evacuated and transferred to the adjacent Yazoo County. Hospital CEO S. Jerry Keever told *Mississippi Today* that the destruction felt like “being in the middle of a war zone.”

Though Mississippi’s Republican governor, Tate Reeves, and President Joe Biden both issued emergency declarations for the state in the wake of the tornado, their statements of concern and condolence have a miserable track record. Such pro forma declarations are made time and again after every “natural” disaster whose consequences are made infinitely worse by lack of preparation and long-term social neglect, particularly in impoverished rural communities.

Residents are well aware of this. Andrew Dennard, a 28-year-old resident of Rolling Fork, told NBC News, “I don’t think we’re going to rebuild from this... It’s worse than death.”

The living conditions of the working class and poor in rural communities, often reflected through a large number of mobile homes in trailer parks, render these portions of the population more vulnerable to extreme weather events.

A report published in October 2018 by the American Meteorological Society, entitled “Finescale Assessment of Mobile Home Tornado Vulnerability in the Central and Southeast United States,” found that “tornado disaster potential and impact severity are controlled by hazard risk and underlying physical and social vulnerabilities. Previous vulnerability studies have suggested that an important driver of disaster consequence is the type of housing affected by tornadic winds.”

Analyzing the implications of the mobile home prevalence in Alabama versus that of Kansas, the report stated: “the Southeast’s mobile home residents are one of the most socioeconomically and demographically marginalized populations in the United States and are more susceptible to tornado impact and death than illustrated in prior research.”

In comments last year to CNN comparing the impact of tornadoes in the US southeast to that of the traditional “Tornado Alley” comprising the central US, meteorology professor Victor Gensini said, “As you move east from Kansas to Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee, the population density increases rapidly, and we also have an issue in the Southeast of more mobile homes,” adding, “If you get hit in a mobile home from a tornado, you’re much more likely to be killed. You just have a really unique exposure and vulnerability problem.”

In response to the impact of last weekend’s tornadoes, which devastated towns such as Rolling Fork, where a fifth of the town’s 2,000 residents exist below the federal poverty line, another meteorology professor, Walker Ashley, said, “You mix a particularly socioeconomically vulnerable landscape with a fast-moving, long-track nocturnal tornado, and disaster will happen.”

Behind the empty thoughts and prayers from Reeves and Biden stand the true costs of human-induced climate change on the one hand, contributing to mass displacement of billions, while, on the other, the ruling capitalist class continues its duplicitous mantra that there is no money for any of society’s problems as it increases funding for war and bailouts for the financial oligarchy.



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