

Storm death toll continues to rise in US South

By Naomi Spencer
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At least 350 people were killed, thousands were injured and hundreds are still missing in the aftermath of the April 27 tornadoes that tore through seven southern US states. The death toll, expected to rise in the coming days, is the highest inflicted by tornadoes since 1936.

In Alabama, the death toll has grown to 248 as local emergency crews and residents dig through destroyed neighborhoods. On Sunday, state emergency management officials reported that the storm injured 2,219 residents, and rendered tens of thousands homeless.

The city of Tuscaloosa, hit by one of the most powerful tornadoes ever recorded, has confirmed 45 people killed and over 990 injured. While house-to-house rescue operations have transitioned to recovery of the dead, 434 people remain unaccounted for.

Mayor Walter Maddox said at a meeting late Saturday that the list of missing had been reduced by more than 200 since Friday, but other names were added Saturday after extensive searches. "I do continue to grow concerned about this number," Maddox said. "I was very hopeful that I could come out here tonight and report to you that number had been drastically reduced ... My sense is that we will have more fatalities."

More than 5,700 buildings and homes were damaged in the city along a mile-wide swath, including the emergency and police center as well as the municipal garbage collection service center. Water and electric infrastructure was also damaged.

In addition to Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia have declared states of emergency. The region received warning of potential tornadoes for days in advance of the powerful system, but many residents had nowhere safe enough in their neighborhoods or workplaces to take shelter when the storms struck. (See the

accompanying eyewitness report from Alabama.)

Countless local media interviews with survivors relate terrifying experiences of crouching in closets or bathtubs, seeing their loved ones sucked away, or being peppered with glass shards and other debris. Doctors and coroners have described seeing victims with such horrendous trauma that they were dismembered or left so unrecognizable that they cannot be identified.

Numerous small towns across the region have been utterly demolished; aerial photographs of the damage resemble the aftermath of a tsunami. "We're in the thousands of homes completely gone," Alabama Emergency Management Agency spokesperson Yasamie August commented to Reuters. "It's not an exaggeration to say that whole communities were wiped out."

In Mississippi, where 35 people died, Governor Haley Barbour said the number of fatalities could rise. "We know there is a tremendous amount of debris," under which bodies could still be buried, Barbour indicated to reporters at a press conference in hard-hit Smithville, adding that there was also "some risk that the waterways that surround this area could possibly contain human remains." In Smithville, at least 17 residents were killed by an F5 tornado that had recorded wind speeds in excess of 200 miles per hour.

The economic toll of the disaster has yet to be fully assessed. Reuters cited the forecast of a private disaster risk modeler, EQECAT, at between \$2 to \$5 billion across the Deep South. In addition to residential damage, major industries and agricultural concerns have been destroyed, threatening to further compound the already poor economic situations in the Southern states.

Among other economic losses in Alabama, the poultry industry has lost millions of chickens, operations were halted at a coal mine, and the Wrangler Jeans plant, a primary employer in the rural northwest

part of the state, was destroyed.

The Obama administration has insisted it is committed to recovery in the region, while stressing that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was to play only “a support role” to local and state authorities. Officials are seeking to avoid public backlash like that prompted by the inaction of the Bush administration in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, as well as of the Obama administration in the weeks after last year’s Gulf oil disaster.

On Friday, President Barack Obama made a brief tour of the devastated areas, mainly for photo-op purposes, with his family in tow. He traveled the same day to Florida for a previously scheduled visit, including an evening commencement address at Miami-Dade College.

The administration has explicitly ruled out a centralized response. Touring parts of the affected region on Sunday, FEMA Director Craig Fugate insisted the federal government would step in to oversee the recovery only as a last resort. “It’s inappropriate, I think, for people in Washington to take over what is a primary state response,” he said. Instead, the agency has placed liaisons in Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

FEMA has said it will award hundreds of millions in contract funds to construction firms. Residents in some areas complained that contractors were already trolling for work, contributing to a shortage of heavy equipment.

So far, the bulk of response has come from municipal rescue teams, church-based organizations, and volunteers. Officials have turned away people eager to help and donate supplies to residents. The director of one Atlanta, Georgia-based homeless advocacy group told the *New York Times* that authorities had said not to send aid caravans of water, toiletries, and other supplies to Alabama. “Why would you say don’t send stuff? How much can you hurt another family by giving them clothes when they don’t have any?”

Of the tens of thousands of Alabama residents whose homes were demolished, only 1,100 people were being housed in government shelters. Many stayed with relatives, or simply camped inside their damaged homes under tarps and plastic sheeting.

FEMA has announced it is moving in temporary trailers, a plan that has drawn criticism from many

residents in the region concerned that more storm systems will come in the peak tornado months of May and June. Trailers are widely acknowledged to be structurally insufficient in tornado-prone areas.

The National Weather Service on May 1 estimated the storm system spawned 266 tornadoes over a 24-hour period. This figure is 118 more than the previous record of 148 in the 1974 super-cell storm. Terry Getz, a senior meteorologist with the weather agency in Tennessee, told the *Knoxville News Sentinel* that he’s never issued so many tornado warnings for a single event. “Every storm was tornadic and every storm had very intense rotation,” Getz commented. “The atmosphere was just prime and conducive to tornadic storms.”

Over the month of April, a series of severe thunderstorms killed up to 400 people throughout the Midwest and South, and threatens the Mississippi River region with massive flooding. The storms produced 685 tornadoes, the most for the month of April since recordkeeping began in the 1950s, with two of the four largest clusters of tornadoes ever recorded produced in the past three weeks.

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