

39 dead in US tornado outbreak

By Naomi Spencer
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A spate of tornadoes Friday across the Midwest and South left 39 dead, hundreds injured, and entire towns demolished.

Worst hit was eastern Kentucky, where at least 21 were killed, and southern Indiana, where 13 people died. Three others died in Ohio; Alabama and Georgia also reported one death each. Tornadoes caused damage across a 1,000-mile swath of the central United States.

The storms came on the heels of a deadly series of tornadoes that took at least 13 lives early Wednesday morning (See “Tornadoes kill 12 in US Midwest, South”).

The towns of Henryville, Indiana and West Liberty, Kentucky were devastated March 2.

Residents of Henryville, a town of 1,900 across the Ohio River from Louisville, Kentucky, said that the community had been “wiped off the map” by a category EF-4 tornado. Destroyed were neighborhoods, shops and schools.

The press is replete with first-hand accounts of the terrifying disaster in Henryville. “A sheriff’s deputy points out a pile of rubble where a mom protecting her kids was injured; both her legs were amputated,” writes *USA Today*. “He indicates another house whose owner was extricated with a broken back.”

Neighboring Marysville was “completely gone,” the local sheriff told the press. The municipal water tower was one of the few structures that remain standing. The small town has no warning sirens whatsoever.

In nearby Chelsea, four-year-old Daylin Terry Jackson and both of his grandparents were killed. The child was in a basement when the tornado struck, tearing him from his mother’s arms. “It blew him right out of her hands,” a neighbor told the press. “They found the bodies in the field outside.”

In New Pekin, Indiana, a young girl was found injured in a field alone. She was airlifted to a hospital

in Louisville, where she later died. After being identified by relatives, it was discovered that both of her parents and her two younger siblings had all been killed.

“We knew this was coming,” Clark County Sheriff Danny Rodden told reporters Friday night. “We were watching the weather like everyone else. This was the worst case scenario. There’s no way you can prepare for something like this.”

Henryville is without power indefinitely; officials said that an electric substation and transmission lines would have to be entirely rebuilt. Phone service was out and many roads remain blocked with debris.

Forecasters at the National Weather Service had warned since Wednesday of the incoming storms. The NWS designated an area populated by 34 million people at “moderate” or “high” risk of deadly weather.

At the height of the storm, as many as 4 million people were within 25 miles of a tornado. In all, the NWS received 94 reports of tornadoes touching down on the ground, along with more than 200 reports of wind shears or other damaging winds, and hundreds of reports of hail, some the size of tennis balls.

As always, however, the lack of emergency funding, public shelters and other basic infrastructure condemned masses of people to cowering helplessly in the path of the killer storms. Thousands of people living in flimsy trailers and rental apartment buildings were rendered homeless. As the tornadoes struck, residents often had nowhere to go but into closets or bathtubs, clinging to their loved ones.

In many cases, the generosity, compassion and quick thinking of residents and first responders prevented tragedy on an even greater scale. Some 1,400 children were hurriedly evacuated just ahead of a direct hit to their Henryville elementary school, for example. Aerial footage from television news helicopters shows several schools caved in, surrounded by mangled school buses.

Tornadoes this early in the year are relatively uncommon. The storms make this month, after only its first week, the deadliest March for tornadoes since at least 1994, when 40 people were killed.

In eastern Kentucky, tornadoes are rare compared to the Midwest. Much of the housing consists of trailers, clapboard, modular homes, and other structures not built to withstand strong winds. Many if not most homes lack basements. Poor, small mountain communities have no emergency warning systems, lack cellphone reception, and rely primarily upon volunteer emergency rescue crews.

Twenty-seven Kentucky counties reported storm damage and 13 reported tornadoes. At least 20,000 residents remain without power, as temperatures drop and snow threatens the damaged areas.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency—which last week announced that it would pursue “efficiencies” to cut more than \$660 million from its budget—has said it will visit eastern Kentucky on Monday.

“The whole downtown is gone,” Governor Steve Beshear told the *New York Times* after touring the town of West Liberty on Saturday. “It looks like a bomb was dropped right in the middle of the town. Every building is destroyed or on the verge of collapsing.” In the immediate aftermath of the storm Friday night Beshear ordered in National Guard troops to help with rescue operations.

Doctors, nurses and rescue workers from neighboring Morehead were struggling to deal with the many wounded and transport the worst injured to the local hospital. West Liberty’s hospital was obliterated.

The outbreak also hit many of the same communities battered by last year’s disasters. Harvest, Alabama, destroyed in April 2011, was struck again Friday. “I’m basically starting to rebuild, just like I did last year,” Kathleen Graves told CNN after her home was once again shredded. Seventeen counties in Alabama reported moderate to heavy damage, including Madison County, where Harvest is located.

“It destroyed my trailer,” Harvest resident Nancy Lawson said. Her home had also been swept away last year. “It was a nice house,” she said. “I didn’t have much money and no insurance, and so FEMA gave me the trailer.”

“I’m 75 years old and I’m tired,” Lawson added. “It

just makes me feel real tired.”

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