

Oklahoma Tornado Victim Thanks God in Midst of Tragedy

Emergency workers searched for survivors in the rubble of homes, schools and a hospital in an Oklahoma town hit by a powerful tornado, but officials on Tuesday sharply lowered the number of deaths caused by the storm.

The Oklahoma state medical examiner's office said 24 bodies had been recovered from the wreckage of Monday's storm, down from the 51 they had reported earlier. The earlier number likely reflected some double-counted deaths, said Amy Elliott, chief administrative officer for the medical examiner.

The 2-mile (3-km) wide tornado tore through Moore outside Oklahoma City on Monday afternoon, trapping victims beneath the rubble. One elementary school took a direct hit and another was destroyed.

Thunderstorms and lightning slowed the rescue effort on Tuesday, but officials lowered the number of bodies recovered.

"We have got good news. The number right now is 24," Elliot said. "There was a lot of chaos."

She said additional bodies could yet be recovered.

Firefighters from more than a dozen fire departments worked all night under bright spotlights trying to find survivors at Plaza Towers Elementary School, which took a direct hit. Rescuers were sent from other states to join the search.

President Barack Obama declared a major disaster area in Oklahoma, ordering federal aid to supplement state and local efforts in Moore after the deadliest U.S. tornado since 161 people were killed in Joplin, Missouri, two years ago.

The White House said Obama would make a statement on the Oklahoma tornado at 10 a.m. EDT (1400 GMT).

"The whole city looks like a debris field," Glenn Lewis, the mayor of Moore, told NBC.

"It looks like we have lost our hospital. I drove by there a while ago and it's pretty much destroyed," Lewis said.

There was an outpouring of grief on Plaza Towers' Facebook page, with messages from around the country including one pleading simply: "Please find those little children."

The National Weather Service assigned the twister a preliminary ranking of EF4 on the Enhanced Fujita Scale, meaning the second most powerful category of tornado with winds up to 200 mph.

School Tragedy

U.S. Representative Tom Cole, who lives in Moore, said the Plaza Tower school was the most secure and structurally strong building in the area.

"And so people did the right thing, but if you're in front of an F4 or an F5 there is no good thing to do if you're above ground. It's just tragic," he said on MSNBC TV.

At least 60 of the 240 people injured were children, hospital officials said.

Witnesses said Monday's tornado appeared more fierce than the giant twister that was among the dozens that tore up the area on May 3, 1999, killing more than 40 people and destroying thousands of homes. That tornado ranked as an EF5 tornado with wind speeds of more than 200 mph.

The 1999 tornado ranks as the third-costliest tornado in U.S. history, having caused more than \$1 billion in damage at the time, or more than \$1.3 billion in today's dollars. Only the

devastating Joplin and Tuscaloosa tornadoes in 2011 were more costly.

Monday's tornado in Moore ranks among the most severe in the United States

Jeff Alger, 34, who works in the Kansas oil fields on a fracking crew, said his wife Sophia took their children out of school when she heard a tornado was coming and then fled Moore and watched it flatten the town from a few miles away.

"They didn't even have time to grab their shoes," said Alger, who has five children aged 4 to 11. The storm tore part of the roof off of his home. He was with his wife at Norman Regional Hospital to have glass and other debris removed from his wife's bare feet.

Moore was devastated with debris everywhere, street signs gone, lights out, houses destroyed and vehicles tossed about as if they were toys.

The dangerous storm system threatened several southern Plains states with more twisters.

Saved by Cell Phone

Speaking outside Norman Regional Hospital Ninia Lay, 48, said she huddled in a closet through two storm alerts and the tornado hit on the third.

"I was hiding in the closet and I heard something like a train coming," she said under skies still flashing with lightning. The house was flattened and Lay was buried in the rubble for two hours until her husband Kevin, 50, and rescuers dug her out.

"I thank God for my cell phone, I called me husband for help."

Her 7-year-old daughter Catherine, a first-grader at Plaza Towers Elementary School, took shelter with classmates and

teachers in a bathroom when the tornado hit and destroyed the school. She escaped with scrapes and cuts.

At Southmoore High School in Moore, about 15 students were in a field house when the tornado hit. Coaches sent them to an interior locker room and made them put on football helmets, the Oklahoman newspaper said. It said the students survived.

The National Weather Service Storm Prediction Center warned the town 16 minutes before the tornado touched down at 3:01 p.m. (2001 GMT), which is greater than the average eight to 10 minutes of warning, said Keli Pirtle, a spokeswoman for the center in Norman, Oklahoma.

The notice was upgraded to emergency warning with "heightened language" at 2:56 p.m., or five minutes before the tornado touched down, Pirtle said.

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration imposed a temporary flight restriction that allowed only relief aircraft in the area, saying it was at the request of police who needed quiet to search for buried survivors.

Oklahoma activated the National Guard, and the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency activated teams to support recovery operations and coordinate responses for multiple agencies.

Briarwood Elementary School, which also stood in the storm's path, was all but destroyed. On the first floor, sections of walls had been peeled away, giving clear views into the building; while in other areas, cars hurled by the storm winds were lodged in the walls.

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