

10 Dead After Tornado Hits South

by The Associated Press

Will Smith/AP

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Rescuers spread out Sunday to scour neighborhoods of splintered homes and twisted debris in Mississippi, a day after a devastating tornado sliced through the state and killed 10 people, including three children.

All was still Sunday morning as the sun rose amid one of the hardest hit areas of Yazoo City. About 40 National Guard soldiers patrolled the area, some in Humvees and others in a Blackhawk helicopter. Dozens of volunteer state troopers and other law enforcement officers also came from far-flung parts of the state to help.

The high winds on Saturday ripped roofs off buildings in hard-hit Yazoo County, a county of about 28,000 people known for blues, catfish and cotton where Gov. Haley Barbour grew up. He described "utter obliteration" among the picturesque hills rising from the flat Mississippi Delta.

"This tornado was enormous," Barbour told The Associated Press as searchers resumed their work.

He estimated at least 100 houses in Yazoo County alone had severe damage but said his estimate could rise later.

Speaking in the parking lot of a heavily damaged restaurant, Barbour said emergency crews would be going to isolated houses in rural areas they had been unable to reach in the first chaotic hours after Saturday's storm.

Around him, he stood against a backdrop of snapped trees stretching to the horizon, houses wiped from their foundations and odd debris -- including a child's stuff toy and a metal boat laying alongside a road.

Meteorologists said it was too soon to tell whether a single long-lasting tornado -- or multiple shorter ones -- caused the arc of death and damage in far-flung Mississippi communities. The same storm front spawned heavy thunderstorms that raked across the Southeast, snapping trees, damaging rooftops and scattering hail.

On Sunday, some recalled terrifying moments.

Josiah Moton, 31, and his girlfriend, Morgan Hayden, 27, were in their Yazoo County home when the sky darkened Saturday and Moton went out to try to move his vehicle to a safer spot.

"The wind was coming so strong it tried to tote me away," Moton said.

He ran back inside and they both huddled in a bathtub. Neither one had even a cut. But now they are homeless -- the bathroom was the only room not destroyed, the rest of the house reduced to rubble.



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"Someone else's kitchen sink is where our kitchen used to be," Hayden said.

Yazoo County's coroner, Ricky Shivers, was in his own truck when the winds flipped the vehicle four times. Shivers went to the hospital to have bruised ribs and cuts treated, then went out to help identify bodies in his hospital gown. He told the AP by phone Sunday morning that he did not know whether any more people had died because he was back in the hospital have his wounds tended to.

Indeed, there were many stories of unlikely survival amid the destruction.

In pine-forest filled Choctaw County, six people rode out the storm inside Sullivan's Crossroads Grocery and escaped with only cuts and bruises, said owner Ron Sullivan. The shop's wooden roof was torn off, its cinderblock walls reduced to heaps of stone on this calm and sunny Sunday morning.

A few items from the store had been salvaged -- jars of pickled eggs and pigs' feet.

Sullivan said he was on the phone with a National Weather Service meteorologist who wanted to know what the conditions were. Sullivan told him: "Something's happening, and it's happening now."

Then the phone went dead. And Sullivan was off his feet.

"I was levitated and flew 15 feet over there to the back wall," Sullivan said. "The only reason I wasn't killed was the wall was still there. After I hit it, it collapsed."

Sullivan's wife had hidden behind a chest freezer -- which ultimately saved her life. A large steel storage tank was uprooted by the twister and then rolled into the store. It came to rest against the freezer -- if it hadn't been there to stop the tank, it would have crushed his wife, Sullivan said.

Meanwhile Sunday, Houston Astros pitcher Roy Oswalt was driving a bucket loader, trying to knock down a damaged tree near his parents' home in Choctaw County. His black Cadillac Escalade was parked outside what remained of his parents' now-decimated home.

His father, Billy Oswalt, had been out hunting when the storm hit. The pitcher's mother, Jean, hunkered down in the house with the family's dog.

"She got our little dog and covered up and she's OK," Billy Oswalt said.

The Oswalts' home sat across the street from Sullivan's store. The twister apparently followed the road away from the house and made its way over a grove of pine trees. Most of the trees in the twister's path had the tops hacked off about eight feet above the ground, as though someone had sawed through them. After that, it slammed into three mobile homes.

Alphonzo Evans 38, was in one of the homes Saturday. He was sifting through what was left -- most of the house had been blown into the woods, only the blocks it stood on remaining. He said he had been asleep when he heard the wind come up. He had planned to take cover in a hole outside, but it was too late. He shut the door.

"By the time I turned around, the wind came up and I went flying," Evans said.

The trailer flipped twice and broke apart, and Evans woke up on the ground beneath a fallen pine tree, wedged between his television and stove, he said.

Sheriff's Deputy Johnny Ellington in Choctaw County said the storm left a swath of destruction about 10 miles long in that area.

Tornadoes also were reported in Louisiana, Arkansas and Alabama, and the severe weather continued to track northeastward early Sunday as gusty winds also downed trees crossing northwest Georgia.

The severe weather began in Louisiana when a tornado destroyed 12 homes and warehouses at Complex Chemical Co., which makes antifreeze and other automotive fluids.

The storm system moved east, with the twister hitting nearby Yazoo County, Miss., killing four people. In adjacent Holmes County, another person was killed. A little farther northeast, a tornado hit Choctaw County, where another five victims were reported, including children ages 3 months, 9 and 14.

Associated Press writers Emily Wagster Pettus in Yazoo City, Jack Elliott Jr. in Jackson, Maria Burnham in French Camp, Jackie Quinn in Washington, Janet McConaughey in New Orleans and Jacob Jordan in Atlanta contributed to this report.