

Tornadoes, damaging storms sweep across Midwest

November 18 2013, by David Mercer



East Peoria resident Billy Vestal evacuates with his daughter, Lillian Vestal, 3, after a tornado damaged the area near Chestnut Road in East Peoria, Il., Sunday, Nov. 17, 2013. Intense thunderstorms and tornadoes swept across the Midwest on Sunday, causing extensive damage in several central Illinois communities while sending people to their basements for shelter. (AP Photo/Journal Star, Justin Wan)

(AP)—Dozens of tornadoes and intense thunderstorms swept across the U.S. Midwest on Sunday, causing extensive damage in several central

Illinois communities, killing at least three people and prompting officials at Chicago's Soldier Field to evacuate the stands and delay the Bears pro football game.

An elderly man and his sister were killed when a tornado hit their home around noon in the rural community of New Minden, said Mark Styninger, the coroner of Washington County in southern Illinois. A third person died in the central Illinois town of Washington, said Melanie Arnold of the Illinois Emergency Management Agency. She did not provide details.

By mid-afternoon, with communications difficult and many roads impassable, it remained unclear how many people were killed or hurt by the string of unusually strong late-season tornadoes. In a news release, the Illinois National Guard said it had dispatched 10 firefighters and three vehicles to Washington to assist with immediate search and recovery operations.

"The whole neighborhood's gone. The wall of my fireplace is all that is left of my house," said Michael Perdun, speaking by cellphone from the hard-hit town of Washington, where he said his neighborhood was wiped out in a matter of seconds.

"I stepped outside and I heard it coming. My daughter was already in the basement, so I ran downstairs and grabbed her, crouched in the laundry room and all of a sudden I could see daylight up the stairway and my house was gone."

Washington Alderman Tyler Gee told WLS-TV that as he walked through neighborhoods immediately after the tornado struck, he "couldn't even tell what street I was on."

"Just completely flattened—some of the neighborhoods here in town,

hundreds of homes."



Pat Whitaker, 82, sits under a blanket in her nightgown outside her home waiting for help to come in Gifford, Ill. on Sunday, Nov. 17, 2013. Intense thunderstorms and tornadoes swept across the Midwest, causing extensive damage in several central Illinois communities while sending people to their basements for shelter. (AP Photo/The News-Gazette, Robin Scholz)

Among those who lost his home was Curt Zehr, who said he was amazed at the speed with which the tornado turned his farmhouse outside Washington into a mass of rubble scattered over hundreds of yards (meters). His truck was sent flying and landed on a tree that had toppled over.

Steve Brewer, chief operating officer at Methodist Medical Center of Illinois in Peoria, said 14 people had come to the hospital seeking

treatment for minor injuries, while another Washington area hospital had received about 15 patients.

He said doctors and other medical professionals were setting up a temporary emergency care center to treat the injured before transporting them to hospitals, while others were dispatched to search through the rubble for survivors.

About 90 minutes after the tornado destroyed homes in Washington, the storm darkened downtown Chicago. As the rain and high winds slammed into the area, officials at Soldier Field evacuated the stands and ordered the Bears and Baltimore Ravens off the field. Fans were allowed to return to their seats shortly after 2 p.m., and the game resumed after about a two-hour delay.

Just how many tornadoes hit was unclear Sunday afternoon. According to the National Weather Service's website, a total of 65 tornadoes had struck, the bulk of them in Illinois. But meteorologist Matt Friedlein said the total might fall because emergency workers, tornado spotters and others often report the same tornado.

Earlier, the National Weather Service issued warnings about the rapidly moving storm system. Officials warned that people might not realize the potential severity because the storms were coming late in the season.

"This is a very dangerous situation," said Russell Schneider, director of the National Weather Service's Storm Prediction Center.

"Approximately 53 million in 10 states are at significant risk for thunderstorms and tornadoes."



Shirley Wolf says she hung on to her dog Sammy for dear life as a tornado destroyed her home at 306 Delshire in Pekin, Il., Sunday, Nov. 17, 2013. Intense thunderstorms and tornadoes swept across the Midwest on Sunday, causing extensive damage in several central Illinois communities while sending people to their basements for shelter. (AP Photo/Journal Star, Fred Zwicky)

At 11 a.m., weather service officials confirmed a tornado had touched down near the central Illinois community of East Peoria, about 150 miles (240 kilometers) southwest of Chicago. Within an hour, tornadoes were reported in Washington, Metamora, Morton and other central Illinois communities.

According to weather service officials, parts of Illinois, Indiana,

southern Michigan and western Ohio were at the greatest risk of seeing tornadoes, large hail and damaging winds throughout the day Sunday, before the storm system pushed into the mid-Atlantic and Northeastern states Sunday evening.

Matt Friedlein, a [weather service](#) meteorologist, said that such strong storms are rare this late in the year because there usually isn't enough heat from the sun to sustain the thunderstorms. But he said temperatures Sunday were expected to reach into the 60s and 70s Fahrenheit (from 16 to 26 degrees Celsius), which he said is warm enough to help produce severe weather when it is coupled with winds, which are typically stronger this time of year than in the summer.

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