

One person dead and 19 injured by Nebraska tornadoes

17 June 2014, by Josh Funk



Two tornados approach Pilger, Neb., Monday June 16, 2014. The National Weather Service said at least two twisters touched down within roughly a mile of each other Monday in northeast Nebraska. (AP Photo/Eric Anderson)

A powerful storm with tornadoes ripped through northeast Nebraska on Monday, destroying more than half of the tiny town of Pilger, killing a 5-year-old child and injuring at least 19 people, hospital and emergency officials said.

The National Weather Service said dual twisters touched down within roughly a mile (1.6 kilometers) of each other. Emergency crews and residents spent the evening sorting through demolished homes and businesses in the community of about 350, roughly 100 miles (160 kilometers) northwest of Omaha.

"More than half of the town is gone—absolutely gone," Stanton County Commissioner Jerry Weatherholt said. "The co-op is gone, the grain bins are gone, and it looks like almost every house in town has some damage. It's a complete mess."

Victims were taken to three regional hospitals, and

at least one had died from unspecified injuries, hospital officials said.

Jodi Richey, a spokeswoman for Faith Regional Health Services in nearby Norfolk, said one person died and 16 others were being treated at the hospital. Hospital officials initially described those patients as being in critical condition, but said later that some had been released after treatment.

The Stanton County Sheriff's Office confirmed late Monday that the person killed was a 5-year-old child. It didn't specify the child's gender.

One was transferred to a trauma center in Omaha, while others required surgery, said Dr. Doug Dilly, who was in the emergency room when patients arrived.

Providence Medical Center in nearby Wayne treated three tornado patients, including two who had lacerations, said hospital spokeswoman Sandy Bartling. Two were released Monday evening, and the third patient was in stable condition, she said.



A tornado forms over a house near Pilger, Neb., Monday, June 16, 2014. At least one person is dead and at least

16 more are in critical condition after two massive tornadoes swept through northeast Nebraska on Monday. (AP Photo/Mark 'Storm' Farnik)

Stanton County Sheriff Mike Unger estimated that 50 to 75 percent of Pilger was heavily damaged or destroyed in the storm. The local school is likely beyond repair, he said.

"It's total devastation," Unger said.

Authorities said the first tornado touched down around 3:45 p.m. and downed several power lines before it leveled a farmhouse. Four people were trapped inside.

While local crews removed them from the debris, a second tornado was spotted southwest of Pilger, according to the Stanton County Sheriff's Office. Shortly afterward, the town suffered a "direct hit" that leveled several buildings, including the Fire Department building, the sheriff's office said. Several people near Main Street in Pilger suffered critical injuries, including the child who later died.

Nebraska Gov. Dave Heineman declared a state of emergency, and the National Guard was preparing to assist local emergency responders and help with the cleanup. Heineman and officials with the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency were expected to arrive Tuesday morning.

Pilger was evacuated for the night, and the Nebraska State Patrol closed all roads into town. Most residents made their own arrangements, but some were taken to a shelter at Wisner-Pilger Jr.-Sr. High School in nearby Wisner.

About a dozen residents had arrived at the makeshift shelter by 9:30 p.m., and school officials were expecting more to come later, said Wisner-Pilger Schools Superintendent Chad Boyer. The shelter will remain open to residents for as long as needed to offer food, water, showers and cots, he said.



Rescue personnel tend to a young tornado victim in Pilger, Neb., Monday, June 16, 2014. A hospital spokeswoman says at least one person is dead and at least 16 more are in critical condition after two massive tornadoes swept through northeast Nebraska. (AP Photo/Mark 'Storm' Farnik)

Tornadoes also caused damage in Cuming and Wayne counties, the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency said in a news release.

"We are still in a response mode in these communities," said Earl Imler, NEMA's operations officer. "We are collecting damage reports from local officials on the ground."

Officials won't know the intensity of the storms until late Tuesday at the earliest, after crews have examined the area, said Barbara Mayes, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Valley.



Firefighters go door to door and check homes for people after a tornado struck in Pilger, Neb., Monday, June 16, 2014. The National Weather Service said at least two twisters touched down within roughly a mile of each other. (AP Photo/The World-Herald, Ryan Soderlin)

A home is seen after a tornado on Monday, June 16, 2014, in Pilger, Neb. The National Weather Service said at least two twisters touched down within roughly a mile of each other. (AP Photo/The Journal-Star, Stacie Scott)

Mayes said the dual tornadoes were unusual because both appeared to have roughly the same strength. In most cases, she said, one tornado tends to be larger and more powerful than the other, and the bigger cyclone grows stronger as the smaller one weakens.

"It's less common for two tornadoes to track together for so long, especially with that same intensity," she said. "By no means is it unprecedented. But we don't see it often."

Meteorologists with the National Weather Service also tracked a tornado near the town of Burwell, in central Nebraska. Mayes said they had not received reports of damage.



Severely damaged homes and buildings are seen after a tornado on Monday, June 16, 2014, in Pilger, Neb. The National Weather Service said at least two twisters touched down within roughly a mile of each other. (AP Photo/The Journal-Star, Stacie Scott)



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Damaged cars are parked in front of a garage that was torn down by a tornado on Monday, June 16, 2014, in Pilger, Neb. The National Weather Service said at least two twisters touched down within roughly a mile of each other. (AP Photo/The Journal-Star, Stacie Scott)



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Pam Lempke, left, looks out the window of her mother and stepfathers' home toward the damaged area, as her step-father Jerry Carstens stands outside on Monday, June 16, 2014, in Pilger, Neb. The National Weather Service said at least two twisters touched down within roughly a mile of each other. (AP Photo/The Journal-Star, Stacie Scott)



Residents evacuate the town after a tornado severely damaged the area Monday, June 16, 2014, in Pilger, Neb. The National Weather Service said at least two twisters touched down within roughly a mile of each other. (AP Photo/The Journal-Star, Stacie Scott)



Pam Lempke, of Wakefield, stands by her parents' home and surveys the damaged area in Pilger, Neb., on Monday, June 16, 2014. The National Weather Service said at least two twisters touched down within roughly a mile of each other. (AP Photo/The Journal-Star, Stacie Scott)



A door is marked after it was searched by rescue workers Monday, June 16, 2014, in Pilger, Neb. The National Weather Service said at least two twisters touched down within roughly a mile of each other. (AP Photo/The World-Herald, Ryan Soderlin)



A man holds a girl after she was pulled from the basement of her destroyed home in Pilger, Neb., Monday, June 16, 2014. A hospital spokeswoman says

at least one person is dead and at least 16 more are in critical condition after two massive tornadoes swept through northeast Nebraska. (AP Photo/Mark 'Storm' Farnik)



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A police officer exits the Wisner-Pilger Middle School after checking for people stuck inside Monday, June 16, 2014, in Pilger Neb. The National Weather Service said at least two twisters touched down within roughly a mile of each other. (AP Photo/The World-Herald, Ryan Soderlin)

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Tim Nelson searches for survivors in Pilger, Neb., after the town was hit by a tornado Monday June 16, 2014. At least one person has died due to the storm. (AP Photo/The Omaha World-Herald/Ryan Soderlin) MAGS OUT; ALL NEBRASKA LOCAL BROADCAST TV OUT

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