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Tornado kills 18 in Alabama; 15 at high school

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A home in Enterprise, Alabama, was destroyed Thursday when tornadoes tore through the town.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- **NEW:** Eighteen people reported dead in southern Alabama
- Fifteen died at Enterprise High School
- Meteorologist: System could spawn up to 50 twisters
- Severe storms hit Missouri, Arkansas and Kansas

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ENTERPRISE, Alabama (CNN) -- Tornadoes tore through southern Alabama Thursday, killing at least 18 people, 15 at Enterprise High School, emergency officials said.

"We ask that you continue to pray for our students," Bob Ferris, Assistant Superintendent, said at an evening news conference.

A dusk-to-dawn curfew was imposed on the town to help keep roads clear for emergency workers, who will be working overnight to search the damaged buildings, Enterprise Mayor Kenneth Boswell said.

"There is no question this was a tornado," said Dennis Feltgen, meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

Students at Enterprise High School were taking cover in the hallways when it was hit. ([Watch scenes of destruction](#))

"The whole building just collapsed on everybody," said Chase Baldwin, a student at the school. "A bunch of people were trapped under cinder blocks, and people had their heads cut open."

CNN's senior Pentagon correspondent Jamie McIntyre, in the area to cover a military story, said Enterprise is reeling from "utter devastation" as anguished parents rushed to the town's severely damaged high school.

"[There are] vehicles flipped over, houses gone. This huge brick and steel building [was] torn apart by the power of the storm," McIntyre said.

"You can see the grief on the faces of the people who come here," he added. "I saw one student walking away, being comforted by another student."

The sprawling high school "looked like a bomb dropped on [it.] All the school buses are demolished," said Laren Allgood, a reporter for the Enterprise Ledger.

Allgood said alarms alerted the town's 20,000 residents before the tornado hit. "We knew to take cover."

The National Weather Service reported a swath of damage about 200 yards wide in Enterprise.

"I heard rumbling," said Walt Thornton, who works at the Enterprise Municipal Airport. "I looked up to the southwest and saw ... a huge tornado going on in the valley behind some of our hangars."

He estimated the funnel cloud was "probably a quarter mile from me." Thornton said it did not hit the airport.

A tornado was also reported in nearby Abbeville, in Henry County, Alabama, a spokesman for the Abbeville Police Department said.

"We had one residence that was struck, no reports of injuries," said public information officer Chad Sowell. About half a mile away, 10 miles west of Abbeville, an 18-wheeler was overturned on State Highway 10 and the driver was trapped, he said.

Alabama Gov. Bob Riley ordered the state's National Guard to send a contingent of 140 troops, including medics, MPs and roving security patrols from Mobile to Enterprise. Their primary mission is

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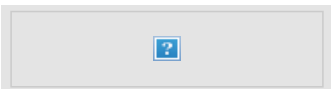
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security.

The National Guard has three CH-47 Chinook cargo helicopters, as well as an engineering unit on standby if needed for search and rescue or debris removal.

In addition, at least two UH-1 "Huey" medevac helicopters were sent from nearby Fort Rucker to the high school.

Riley also declared a state of emergency in the area.

President Bush was briefed on the storm while in New Orleans Thursday afternoon and again when he boarded Air Force One for the return flight to Washington. He telephoned Riley and Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt en route.

"The president is deeply saddened to hear of the loss of life," said White House spokesman Scott Stanzel. "He is thinking about the families of the victims and the citizens of the states, and the administration stands ready to help."

One death in Missouri blamed on system

Earlier Thursday, a suspected tornado touched down at least twice in southern Missouri, leaving one person dead and four injured, according to Susie Stonner of the Missouri State Emergency Management Agency. ([Watch storm's path of destruction](#))

Dennis Crider, a journalist for the West Plains Quill, told CNN the fatality was a 7-year-old girl in the small community of Caulfield. Three of the injured were her father, mother and a brother, Crider quoted the Howell County sheriff as saying.

A gas station in Caulfield, about 15 miles west of West Plains, was destroyed by the storm, according to the assistant manager of a neighboring station.

"It's like a war zone down there," said Delora Murta. ([Gallery](#))

She said the roof and the back wall of the other gas station is gone and two huge trees nearby were uprooted. An antique store and restaurant across the road also suffered some damage, Murta said.

The station has been owned by the same family for three generations.

"I never thought [that] I'd see it blown down, no," owner Peggy Jarvis said as she surveyed the damage. "When I heard it was flattened and blown away, I couldn't believe it."

Volatile system formed quickly

"We had a spotter who watched [the tornado] form and dissipate in 10 minutes," said West Plains Emergency Management Coordinator Kent Edge.

The storm system hit northern Arkansas Thursday morning. Hail covered the ground but there was no damage and officials do not believe a tornado touched down.

"It looked awful," said Fulton County Emergency Management Coordinator Al Rook. "But we just had hail and rain."

In the city of Moberly in north-central Missouri, a possible tornado blew a tractor-trailer truck on its side, slightly injuring the driver. It also tore the roof off of one business and damaged a hangar at the regional airport and a plane inside it, according to Sgt. Kevin Palmatory of Moberly Police.

On the north side of the storm, blizzard-like conditions and heavy snow were hitting the states in the path of the system. ([Full story](#))

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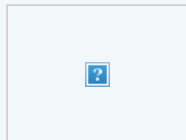
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15 die as tornado smashes school

Eight people were killed and several injured when a tornado struck a high school in Alabama on Thursday afternoon, emergency officials said.

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