

Killer tornado becomes one for the books in Maryland

Violent storms kill at least 6 in 4 states

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LA PLATA, Maryland (CNN) -- A tornado in southern Maryland that killed three people and left a "war zone" of destruction in its wake was one of the strongest to ever hit the state, a National Weather Service spokeswoman said Monday.

A statement from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said its damage assessment team rated the tornado an F5 on the Fujita Tornado Damage Scale, "a monster of a tornado" with winds in the 261-318 mph range.

The storm was one of a series of storms that claimed at least six lives Sunday, officials said.

The path of the tornado began more than 10 miles west of La Plata, then strengthened to F5 as it reached the town, where two of the three victims died and there was widespread devastation.

"The magnitude of the damage is very impressive," Watson said. "One of the strongest tornadoes ever to strike the state of Maryland ... not just a few buildings demolished but many buildings demolished." Monday, search crews rushed from house to house in La Plata looking for anyone trapped in debris. Dozens of people were injured in the storm.

One of the victims, who lived just outside La Plata, was 51-year-old William Gardner Erickson, who died when his house collapsed. Another La Plata resident was found dead in a vehicle near the main thoroughfare in this town of 6,500. A report that a third Charles County resident had died Monday proved false.

The third fatality was near Prince Frederick, further east in neighboring Calvert County.

"It's devastating," said Nina Voehl of the Charles County Sheriff's Department. "There are many businesses here that are flattened, and there are no roofs [on many buildings.] The Red Cross has no office -- the roof was totally taken off."

The Maryland tornado was just one example of Mother Nature's fury Sunday, a day marked by several strong storms.

Deaths in other states

Early Sunday, a series of tornadoes swept through southeastern Missouri, Illinois and western Kentucky, killing three people, and damaging homes and buildings. The tornado that hit Maryland was part of a storm system with heavy rain, high winds and hail that rumbled east from the Ohio Valley.

Strong wind and hail the size of Ping Pong balls battered Bedford County, Virginia, Sunday afternoon, damaging at least 50 homes east of Roanoke, officials said. There were no reports of injuries, but stores in downtown Bedford had extensive damage.

In La Plata, Mayor William Eckman said, "It's like a war zone out there."

The hardest-hit areas of La Plata were evacuated, and schools and government offices were closed, Voehl said. Dozens of area families left homeless were being sheltered by the Red Cross.

The tornado also knocked over the town's 125-foot water tower, and citizens were asked to conserve water, Eckman said. Structural engineers were assessing the integrity of buildings and planned to fly over the community Monday.

About 4,800 households in the area, including nearby Benedict and Hughesville, remained without electrical power, Voehl said. At the height of the storm, there were 24,710 homes without electricity.

La Plata's hospital, Civista Medical Center, had damage to windows and its parking lot.

"The alert was sounded in time to have all of our staff and patients move away from the windows," said spokeswoman Chris Stefanides. "We're continuing our operations here, but we are still in an emergency situation and accepting victims from around the community."

Charles County Commissioner Murray Levy said he saw the tornado touch near his home, just outside La Plata.

"I'd never heard anything like that in my life," he said. "My wife and I were on the back porch and she said, 'Do you hear that?' And it was a roar and then I saw the funnel, and then it touched down just to the east of our house."

About 12 people from Charles County were taken to trauma centers in the region and about 80 people were sent to area hospitals for treatment, Voehl said.

At least four people were taken to Washington Hospital Center in Washington, where two were reported in critical condition.

-- CNN Assignment Editor Patrick Davis contributed to this report.