

Tornadoes kill at least 17

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By Peggy Gargis and Verna Gates

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama (Reuters) - Tornadoes swept across the Southern United States and killed at least 17 people across three states, ripping up a hospital and a high school, CNN and Fox News reported on Friday.

They said nine were killed in Georgia, where a hospital was hit, seven in Alabama where a high school was torn open and collapsed, and one, a little girl, in Missouri.

"Enterprise has suffered major and widespread damage," said Alabama Gov. Bob Riley, who declared a state of emergency and sent 100 National Guard troops to the town.

Riley said rescue workers were still moving debris to search for survivors as night fell.

In Georgia, storms that swept through the southwestern part of the state killed at least nine people and caused an unknown number of injuries, CNN said.

Two were killed in Americus, Georgia, when the Sumter Regional Hospital was hit by an apparent tornado. Buzz Weiss, spokesman for the Georgia Emergency Management Agency, said it wasn't known whether the two were patients.

"Sumter County has apparently lost of all its ambulances and rescue vehicles," Weiss said.

A third fatality was in Taylor County, which is just a bit north of Americus, Weiss added.

In the Missouri town of Caulfield, a tornado killed a girl in a mobile home, damaging six other homes and two gasoline stations, officials said.

Television news footage showed helicopters landing on the football field near wreckage of the school in Enterprise, while ambulances came and went. The shredded building was surrounded by broken trees and overturned cars.

Emergency officials told local television that at least one teacher was among those killed at the school. CNN quoted a young eyewitness as saying he

carried the bodies of two young girls out of the building.

President Bush, who earlier toured New Orleans and the Gulf Coast to assess the recovery from Hurricane Katrina, called the Alabama and Missouri governors to extend condolences and offer aid, the White House said.

Alabama state officials sent search and rescue teams, ambulances, generators and emergency lights to Enterprise to aid the search for survivors. Phone service and electricity were out through much of the area.

Doctors treated more than 50 people for lacerations, broken bones and other injuries, hospital CEO Jeff Brannon said. Most of them were hurt at the school.

Hospital workers had rushed to move patients away from the windows as sirens screamed out a warning moments before a dark funnel cloud roared past. Hospital windows burst and cars were pummeled in the hospital parking lot, Brannon said.

Parts of several Midwestern states and regions as far south as the Gulf Coast to the Florida Panhandle had been under tornado watches or warnings most of the day.

In Chicago, more than 400 flights were canceled at O'Hare International Airport as gusty storms and fog rolled in.

Thursday's storms came just a month after a tornado killed about 20 people in central Florida.

(Additional reporting by Ed Stoddard in Dallas, Andrew Stern in Chicago and Karen Jacobs in Atlanta)

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