

Kentucky tornado toll in dozens; less than feared at factory

AP apnews.com/article/tornadoes-kentucky-illinois-arkansas-tennessee-missouri-e1ae21e0b7521c28411f8c360b756700

MAYFIELD, Ky. (AP) — Workers on the night shift at Mayfield Consumer Products were in the middle of the holiday rush, cranking out candles, when a tornado closed in on the factory and the word went out: “Duck and cover.”

Autumn Kirks pulled down her safety goggles and took shelter, tossing aside wax and fragrance buckets to make room. She glanced away from her boyfriend, Lannis Ward, and when she looked back, he was gone.

Gov. Andy Beshear initially said Saturday that only 40 of the 110 people working in the factory at the time were rescued, and that “it’ll be a miracle if anybody else is found alive in it.” But on Sunday, the candle company said that while eight were confirmed dead and eight remained missing, more than 90 others had been located.

Dozens of people in several Kentucky counties are still believed to have died in the storms, but Beshear, after saying Sunday morning the state’s toll could exceed 100, said that afternoon it might be as low as 50.

“We are praying that maybe original estimates of those we have lost were wrong. If so, it’s going to be pretty wonderful,” the governor said.

Kentucky was the worst-hit state by far in an unusual mid-December swarm of twisters across the Midwest and the South that leveled entire communities and left at least 14 people dead in four other states.

At the candle factory, rescuers had to crawl over the dead to get to the living at a disaster scene that smelled like scented candles.

But by the time churchgoers gathered Sunday morning to pray for the lost, more than 24 hours had elapsed since anyone had been found alive in the wreckage. Instead, crews recovered pieces of peoples’ lives — a backpack, a pair of shoes and a cellphone with 27 missed messages were among the items.

Layers of steel and cars 15 feet deep were on top of what used to be the factory roof, the governor said.

“We’re going to grieve together, we’re going to dig out and clean up together, and we will rebuild and move forward together. We’re going to get through this,” Beshear said. “We’re going to get through this together, because that is what we do.”

Satellite images provided by Maxar shows Mayfield Consumer Products candle factory and nearby buildings after a tornado caused heavy damage in the area, in Mayfield, Ky. (Satellite image ©2021 Maxar Technologies via AP)

Four twisters hit the state in all, including one with an extraordinarily long path of about 200 miles (322 kilometers), authorities said. The outbreak was all the more remarkable because it came at a time of year when cold weather normally limits tornadoes.

Warren County coroner Kevin Kirby said the death toll from the storms in an around Bowling Green grew by one on Sunday to 12.

“I’ve got towns that are gone, that are just, I mean gone. My dad’s hometown — half of it isn’t standing,” Beshear said of Dawson Springs.

He said that going door to door in search of victims is out of the question in the hardest-hit areas: “There are no doors.”

“We’re going to have over 1,000 homes that are gone, just gone,” the governor said.

With afternoon high temperatures forecast only in the 40s, tens of thousands of people were without power. About 300 National Guard members went house to house, checking on people and helping to remove debris. Cadaver dogs searched for victims.

Kirks said she and her boyfriend were about 10 feet apart in a hallway when someone said to take cover. Suddenly, she saw sky and lightning where a wall had been, and Ward had vanished.

“I remember taking my eyes off of him for a second, and then he was gone,” she said.

Later, she got the terrible news — that Ward had been killed in the storm.

“It was indescribable,” Pastor Joel Cauley said of the disaster scene. “It was almost like you were in a twilight zone. You could smell the aroma of candles, and you could hear the cries of people for help. Candle smells and all the sirens is not something I ever expected to experience at the same time.”

The outbreak also killed at least six people in Illinois, where an Amazon distribution center in Edwardsville was hit; four in Tennessee; two in Arkansas, where a nursing home was destroyed and the governor said workers shielded residents with their own bodies; and two in Missouri.

Debris from destroyed buildings and shredded trees covered the ground in Mayfield, a city of about 10,000 in western Kentucky. Twisted sheet metal, downed power lines and wrecked vehicles lined the streets. Windows were blown out and roofs torn off the buildings that were still standing.

In the shadows of their crumpled church sanctuaries, two congregations in Mayfield came together on Sunday to pray for those who were lost. Members of First Christian Church and First Presbyterian Church met in a parking lot surrounded by rubble, piles of broken bricks and metal.

“Our little town will never be the same, but we’re resilient,” Laura McClendon said. “We’ll get there, but it’s going to take a long time.”