

42 Syrians Killed Friday As Thousands Protest

BEIRUT (AP) — Security forces opened fire Friday on demonstrators trying to break an army blockade on the southern city of Daraa, while thousands of others across Syria defied a protest ban and denounced President Bashar Assad's harsh crackdown on a six-week uprising. At least 42 people were killed, including 15 in the march on Daraa, according to witnesses and a human rights group.

The protesters in cities across Syria — including the capital of Damascus — called for Assad's ouster, with some chanting "We are not afraid!"

Human rights activist Mustafa Osso said 42 people were killed, but the death toll could rise. His human rights group, based in Syria, compiles casualty tolls from the crackdown.

A witness in Daraa — the heart of the uprising — said residents stayed indoors because the city has been under siege by the military since Monday, when thousands of soldiers backed by tanks and snipers stormed in. People were too afraid even to venture out to mosques for prayers, the witness said.

"We are in our houses but our hearts are in the mosques," the witness said, speaking by satellite telephone and asking that his name not be published for fear of reprisals.

Launch Of Space Shuttle Endeavour Delayed

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — The historic next-to-last space shuttle launch was scratched Friday because of mechanical problems, spoiling a visit from the president and dashing the hopes of the biggest crowd of spectators in years, including the mission commander's wounded wife, Rep. Gabrielle Giffords.

NASA hopes to try again Monday to launch space shuttle Endeavour on its final voyage.

President Barack Obama and his family visited Kennedy Space Center anyway but it was unclear whether he would still meet with the Arizona congresswoman. Giffords, who is recovering from a gunshot wound to the head, has been in Cape Canaveral since Wednesday to attend her husband's launch.

Giffords hasn't been seen publicly since the Jan. 8 assassination attempt, and left her Houston rehabilitation hospital for the first time to travel to Florida. It was not immediately known whether she would stay for another try or return to Houston.

She had been expected to watch the liftoff in private — as were the other astronaut families.

Libyan Military Forces Breach Tunisian Border

TRIPOLI, Libya (AP) — Libyan forces in more than a dozen military vehicles and armed with anti-aircraft guns and rocket launchers crossed into Tunisia on Friday as fighting with rebels raged along the western frontier, witnesses said. Tunisia's government was furious after clashes broke out on its territory and demanded Libya halt all incursions.

In another sign that Moammar Gadhafi's regime was redoubling efforts to beat back resistance in its stronghold of western Libya, NATO warships intercepted several boats laying anti-shipping mines outside the harbor of the rebel-held city of Misrata. The port is the only lifeline for the city of 300,000, which has been under siege by Gadhafi's forces for two months.

Libyan forces also fired rockets and shells at Misrata from the outskirts of town, killing at least eight people.

The fighting on the Libyan-Tunisian border, the attempted mining of the waters near Misrata and the renewed shelling signaled a new push by Gadhafi's forces to retake the two areas of fiercest rebel resistance in the west. It's unlikely Gadhafi would be able to cling to power without consolidating control over western Libya.

The rebels have largely controlled the eastern part of the country since an uprising against Gadhafi, Libya's ruler of 42 years, erupted in mid-February. They have said they will not contemplate a cease-fire before he is pushed out.

Consumer Spending, Incomes Rise In March

WASHINGTON (AP) — Americans earned and spent more in March, but much of the extra money went to pay for gas.

Personal incomes rose 0.5 percent last month and consumer spending increased 0.6 percent, the Commerce Department reported Friday. But after adjusting for inflation, spending rose only 0.2 percent and after-tax incomes were essentially flat.

Consumer spending had been expected to post solid gains this year, helped by stronger employment growth and a 2 percentage-point cut in Social Security payroll taxes. But Americans are paying more for gas, prompting economists to scale back their growth forecasts.

The national average at the pump on Friday was \$3.90 a gallon — 31 cents higher than a month ago and more than \$1 than what consumers paid a year ago.

Less growth in consumer spending was a big reason the overall economy slowed sharply in the first three months of the year. The 1.8 percent growth rate was weaker than the 3.1 percent growth in the previous quarter. Consumer spending is important because it accounts for roughly 70 percent of economic activity.

Court Overturns Stem Cell Research Ban

WASHINGTON (AP) — Opponents of taxpayer-funded embryonic stem cell research lost a key round in a federal appeals court Friday.

In a 2-1 decision, a panel of the U.S. court of appeals in Washington overturned a judge's order that would have blocked federal financing of stem cell research. The judges ruled that opponents are not likely to succeed in their lawsuit to stop the government funding.

The panel reversed an opinion issued last August by U.S. District Judge Royce Lamberth, who said the research likely violates the law against federal funding of embryo destruction.

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Even Rescuers Hobbled By Worst Twisters Since 1932

BY JAY REEVES
AND GREG BLUESTEIN
Associated Press Writers

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. — Southerners found their emergency safety net shredded Friday as they tried to emerge from the nation's deadliest tornado disaster since the Great Depression.

Emergency buildings are wiped out. Bodies are stored in refrigerated trucks. Authorities are begging for such basics as flashlights. In one neighborhood, the storms even left firefighters to work without a truck.

The death toll from Wednesday's storms reached 329 across seven states, including 238 in Alabama, making it the deadliest U.S. tornado outbreak since March 1932, when another Alabama storm killed 332 people. Tornadoes that swept across the South and Midwest in April 1974 left 315 people dead.

Hundreds if not thousands of people were injured Wednesday — 990 in Tuscaloosa alone — and as many as 1 million Alabama homes and businesses remained without power.

The scale of the disaster astonished President Barack Obama when he arrived in the state Friday. "I've never seen devastation like this," he said, standing in bright sunshine amid the wreckage in Tuscaloosa, where at least 45 people were killed and entire neighborhoods were flattened.

Mayor Walt Maddox called it "a humanitarian crisis" for his city of more than 83,000.

Maddox said up to 446 people were unaccounted for in the city, though he added that many of those reports probably were from people who have since found their loved ones but have not notified authorities. Cadaver-detecting dogs were deployed in the city Friday but they had not found any remains, Maddox said.

During the mayor's news conference, a man asked him for help getting into his home, and broke down as he told his story.

"You have the right to cry," Maddox told him. "And I can tell you the people of Tuscaloosa are crying with you."

At least one tornado — a 205 mph monster that left at least 13 people dead in Smithville, Miss. — ranked in the National Weather Service's most devastating category, EF-5. Meteorologist Jim LaDue said he expects "many more" of Wednesday's tornadoes to receive that same rating, with winds topping 200 mph.

Tornadoes struck with unexpected speed in several states, and the difference between life and death was hard to fathom. Four people died in Bledsoe County,



JOHN FITZHUGH/BILOXI SUN HERALD/MCT

Yates and Margaret McDonald's house in Winston County, Mississippi, was reduced to a slab when a tornado struck the area this week as damage assessment continues on Friday.

Tenn., but a family survived being tossed across a road in their modular home, which was destroyed, Mayor Bobby Collier said.

By Friday, residents whose homes were blown to pieces were seeing their losses worsen — not by nature, but by man. In Tuscaloosa and other cities, looters have been picking through the wreckage to steal what little the victims have left.

"The first night they took my jewelry, my watch, my guns," Shirley Long said Friday. "They were out here again last night doing it again."

Overwhelmed Tuscaloosa police imposed a curfew and got help from National Guard troops to try to stop the scavenging.

Along their flattened paths, the twisters blew down police and fire stations and other emergency buildings along with homes, businesses, churches and power infrastructure. The number of buildings lost, damage estimates and number of people left homeless remained unclear two days later, in part because the storm also ravaged communications systems.

Tuscaloosa's emergency management center was destroyed, so officials used space in one of the city's most prominent buildings — the University of Alabama's Bryant-Denny Stadium — as a substitute before moving operations to the Alabama Fire College. Less than two weeks ago, the stadium hosted more than 90,000 fans for the football team's spring intrasquad Red-White Game.

A fire station was destroyed in nearby Alberta City, one of the city's worst-hit neighborhoods. The firefighters survived, but damage to their equipment forced them to begin rescue operations without a

fire truck, city Fire Chief Alan Martin said.

Martin said the department is running normally and has since deployed a backup vehicle to serve the neighborhood. "In reality, it's just an extension of what we do every day," he said.

Also wiped out was a Salvation Army building, costing Tuscaloosa much-needed shelter space. And that's just part of the problem in providing emergency aid, said Sister Carol Ann Gray of the local Catholic Social Services office.

"It has been extremely difficult to coordinate because so many people have been affected — some of the very same people you'd look to for assistance," Gray said.

Emergency services were stretched particularly thin about 90 miles to the north in the demolished town of Hackleburg, Ala., where officials were keeping the dead in a refrigerated truck amid a body bag shortage. At least 27 people were killed there and the search for missing people continued, with FBI agents fanning out to local hospitals to help.

Damage in Hackleburg was catastrophic, said Stanley Webb, chief agent in the county's drug task force.

"When we talk about these homes, they are not damaged. They are gone," he said.

Gail Enlow was in town looking for her aunt, Eunice Cooper, who is in her 70s. She wiped away tears as she pointed to the twisted mess that's left of the housing project

where Cooper lived.

"Nobody's seen her," she said, trying to hold back the sobs. "She can just barely get around and she would need help."

But in Hackleburg as in Tuscaloosa, emergency workers had more to do than aid suffering victims. People have looted a demolished Wrangler jeans distribution center, and authorities locked up drugs from a destroyed pharmacy in a bank.

Fire Chief Steve Hood said he desperately wanted flashlights for the town's 1,500 residents because he doesn't want them using candles that could ignite their homes.

Alabama emergency management officials said Friday that the state had 238 confirmed deaths. There were 34 deaths in Mississippi, 34 in Tennessee, 15 in Georgia, five in Virginia, two in Louisiana and one in Kentucky.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has responded to all affected areas and has officials on the ground in Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky, Georgia and Tennessee, Director Craig Fugate said. State and local authorities remain in charge of response and recovery efforts, Fugate said.

Police Chief Robert Knight said perhaps a quarter of the town of 10,000 is wiped out.

"We're having a hard time recovering," he said. But he vowed that residents will rebuild.

"We'll do it. We'll do it," he said. "We just will. People out here are resilient. It's a good city."

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