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U.S. News

Scouts praised for response to tornado in Iowa

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By TIMBERLY ROSS

BLENCOE, Iowa (AP) - Boy Scouts who came to each others' aid after a tornado that killed four of their comrades and injured 48 people were hailed as heroes Thursday for helping to administer first aid and search for victims buried in their flattened campsite.

Iowa rescue workers cut through downed branches and dug through debris amid rain and lightning Wednesday night to reach the camp where the 93 boys, ages 13 to 18, had huddled for safety through the twister. They and 25 staff members were attending a weeklong leadership training camp.

Lloyd Roitstein, an executive with the Mid America Council of the Boy Scouts of America, reminded reporters at a news conference Thursday that the Boy Scouts motto is "Be Prepared."

"Last night, the agencies and the scouts were prepared," he said. "They knew what to do, they knew where to go, and they prepared well."

Iowa Gov. Chet Culver praised the boys for "taking care of each other."

Boy Scout officials said the scouts and their leaders were aware of weather alerts, but decided not to leave the Little Sioux Scout Ranch, in the Loess Hills, because of the bad weather on the way.

"They were watching the weather and monitoring with a weather radio, listening for updates," said Deron Smith, a national spokesman for the Boy Scouts. "The spot they were at was the lowest spot of camp; it was deemed to be the safest place."

A group of scouts that had set out on a hike had returned to the camp before the storm as a safety procedure, Smith said.

On the other side of the state Thursday, 3,900 homes were evacuated from Cedar Rapids, where rescuers removed people with boats, officials estimated 100 blocks were underwater, and a railroad bridge over the flooded Cedar River collapsed.

"We're seeing very substantial flooding," said Craig Hanson, the city's public works maintenance manager.

In Albert Lea, Minn., 90 miles south of Minneapolis, a man died Thursday when his vehicle plunged from a washed-out road and was submerged in floodwaters.

Also Thursday, several Kansas communities tried to begin the recovery from tornadoes a day earlier that killed at least two people, destroyed much of the small town of Chapman, and caused extensive damage on the Kansas State University campus.

The tornado through the scout camp killed three 13-year-olds and one 14-year-old, Roitstein said. A tornado siren went off at the camp, but the scouts had already taken cover before the siren sounded. There was no time to remove them from the isolated retreat, he said.

Boy Scout officials identified the dead as Aaron Eilerts, 14, of Eagle Grove, Iowa and Josh Fennen, 13, Sam Thomsen, 13, and Ben Petrzilka, 14, all of Omaha.

At least 14 of the injured remained hospitalized Thursday morning, with everything from cuts and bruises to major head trauma, said Eugene Meyer, Iowa's public safety commissioner.

Three were flown to Mercy Medical Center in Sioux City, Iowa, and a fourth was taken there by ambulance. All were listed in serious condition.

All the scouts and staff were accounted for, Meyer said, adding that searchers were making another pass through the grounds to make sure no one else was injured. The camp was destroyed.

Thomas White, a scout supervisor, said he dug through the wreckage of a collapsed fireplace to reach victims in a building where many scouts were seeking shelter when the twister struck at about 6:35 p.m.

"A bunch of us got together and started undoing the rubble from the fireplace and stuff and waiting for the first responders," White told KMTV in Omaha, Neb. "They were under the tables and stuff and on their knees, but they had no chance."

The nearest tornado siren, in nearby Blencoe, sounded only briefly after the storm cut power to the town, said Russ Lawrenson of the Mondamin Fire Department.



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Taylor Willoughby, 13, said several scouts were getting ready to watch a movie when someone screamed that there was a tornado. Everyone hunkered down, he said, and windows shattered.

"It sounded like a jet that was flying by really close," Taylor told NBC's "Today" on Thursday. "I was hoping that we all made it out OK. I was afraid for my life."

Ethan Hession, also 13, said he crawled under a table with his friend.

"I just remember looking over at my friend, and all of a sudden he just says to me, 'Dear God, save us,'" he told "Today." "Then I just closed my eyes and all of a sudden it's (the tornado) gone."

Ethan said the scouts' first-aid training immediately compelled them to act.

"We knew that we need to place tourniquets on wounds that were bleeding too much. We knew we need to apply pressure and gauze. We had first-aid kits, we had everything," he said.

Ethan said one staff member took off his shirt and put it on someone who was bleeding to apply pressure and gauze. Other scouts started digging people out of the rubble, he said.

The injured were taken to Burgess Health Center in Onawa, Alegent Health Clinic in Missouri Valley and Creighton University Medical Center in Omaha.

The 1,800-acre ranch about 40 miles north of Omaha includes hiking trails through narrow valleys and over steep hills, a 15-acre lake and a rifle range.

The tornado touched down as Iowa's eastern half grappled with flooding in several cities. The storm threatened to stretch Iowa's emergency response teams even further.

Iowa Homeland Security spokeswoman Julie Tack said officials were confident the state's emergency response teams could handle the crisis because western Iowa had been largely unaffected by flooding in the eastern part of the state.

Along the Mississippi River in Missouri and Illinois, the National Weather Service was predicting the worst flooding in 15 years. Outlying areas could be inundated, but most of the towns are protected by levees and many low-lying property owners were bought out after massive flooding in 1993, officials said.

Meanwhile, a line of tornadoes cut a diagonal swath across Kansas, causing widespread damage.

Chapman, a Dickinson County town of about 1,400, appeared to be hardest hit.

Brad Homman, director of administration and emergency services for Dickinson County, said Thursday morning that about 100 homes were destroyed or damaged when the twister struck around 10:30 p.m. Wednesday.

"We have no electricity or water or gas at this point," Hammon told reporters in a briefing. "It may be days before it's restored."

Three critically injured residents were at Geary Community Hospital in nearby Junction City, while dozens of what Homman called "walking wounded" suffered cuts, bruises, scrapes and broken bones.

One victim was found in a yard in Chapman, said Sharon Watson, spokeswoman for the Kansas Adjutant General's Department. The other Kansas victim was found outside a mobile home in the Jackson County town of Soldier, Watson said.

The tornado that struck Kansas State University's campus in Manhattan destroyed a wind erosion laboratory and heavily damaged a fraternity house. Debris littered the campus, and classes were canceled, but the university reported no injuries.

—

Associated Press writers Henry C. Jackson in Des Moines, Iowa; Anna Jo Bratton in Onawa, Iowa; and John Hanna in Chapman, Kan., contributed to this report.



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