

Ohio River swells to historical level

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — Raging rain has swollen the Ohio River to its highest level in a generation, flooding the Ohio River swamped more towns up and downstream from Louisville on Wednesday in a slow-motion disaster that may not let up until next week.

Towering flood walls protected Kentucky's largest city from the river, which roiled 14 feet above flood stage. It was the low-lying towns along the river that were most vulnerable to flood waters that weren't going away.

"All we can do is wait for someone to tell us 'You folks can all go home,'" said Sue Colomb, 30, as she waited in a church shelter after fleeing her trailer in the town of West Point, 30 miles down river.

But the water not only did not go down, it rose so high Wednesday that it swamped roads in and out of the town of 1,200, stranding 60 people who didn't get out or refused to leave.

Colomb and her 63-year-old mother took only what they could carry when they left earlier this week — a TV, VCR, their Nintendo game and some meat from their freezer.

They put their bed and couch up on kitchen chairs, tables and a bath-30 room sink. But with their trailers standing in water day after day, they wondered if they will even have a home worth coming back to.

"It will never be the way it was," Colomb said.

Like a big bath tub with the water running, the Ohio River was constantly being filled by runoff from a foot of rain over the weekend. Another quarter inch of rain Wednesday didn't help.

"It's kind of sitting there," said National Weather Service hydrologist Mike Callahan. "It's going to be a very slow fall. ... It might drift up a little bit."

In fact, the Ohio is expected to crest Friday a half foot higher in Louisville, where it reached 37.8 feet on Wednesday. That's worrisome news to evacuees, who wondered when they would ever get back to their homes, and raised the fear they could be in for another round of flooding.

The flood-prone town of Shepherdsville, 20 miles south of Louisville, is just now cleaning up from floods that swamped 90 percent of its downtown and forced 1,000 people to be taken out by boat. It is on the Salt River, which

feeds into the Ohio, and many townfolk fear they could get another dose of flooding when the Ohio crests.

"The old-timers say once the river leaves it doesn't come back — but we don't know," added Jack Porter, 27, as he helped clean out a downtown bank where floodwaters had been chest-high.

"All we're doing is hoping and waiting, hoping the Ol' Ohio doesn't throw us some more backwater," said Butch Sweat, a farmer in nearby Lebanon Junction.

Sweat's two-story house, partly built with logs in 1865, had water up to the ceiling of the second floor. In much of the town, the only way to get around was by boat.

In Tell City, Ind., residents thought their town was safely protected by a 20-foot high concrete flood wall, until the river began gurgling from the ground behind the wall Tuesday night.

Water was shooting through by Wednesday, and more than 120,000 sandbags were thrown

into place by an army of National Guard soldiers, state prisoners and even schoolgirls.

In the hard-hit town of Falmouth, rooftop-high floodwaters finally receded to reveal homes off their foundations and sitting in the middle of streets. Everything was covered in coffee-colored muck — including the bodies of four more victims.

That put the death toll at five in the town of 2,700, where Vice President Al Gore was forced to cancel a tour after fog grounded his helicopter.

Firefighters set up a temporary morgue and went about the grim task of searching house-by-house for more victims.

"I am praying that's all we've got," said police officer Ed Ward. "But I don't think it will be."

The floods already had forced thousands of people from their homes along the Ohio and smaller streams in Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio and West Virginia. Floods and tornadoes were blamed for a total of 55 deaths.

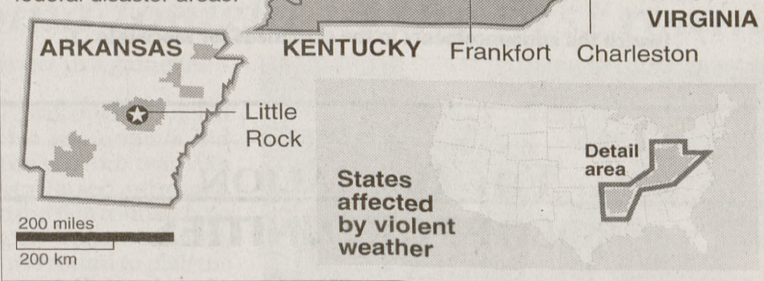
The Kentucky National Guard ordered 1,100 Guardsmen into 25 of the state's hardest-hit counties. Humvees splashed through the streets of West Point, as guardsmen kept watch over the vacant homes and those stranded by the flood.

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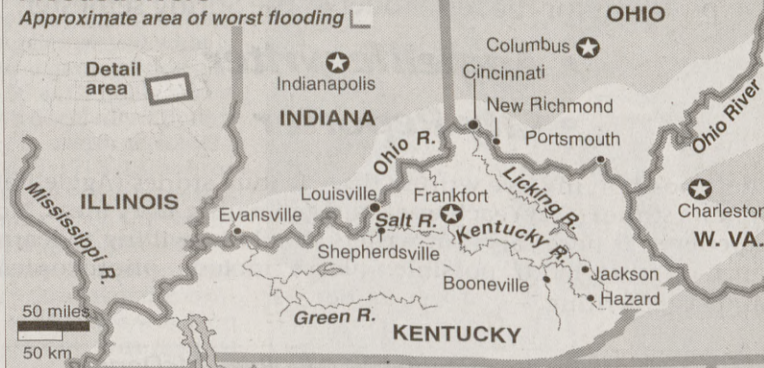
Butch Sweat
Flood victim

Storms damage

Heavy rainfall has caused rivers in some parts of the Tennessee and Ohio valleys to flood. Thousands have been evacuated and thousands of homes have been damaged. Shaded areas include counties declared federal disaster areas:



Flooded rivers



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