

California still flooding; thousands evacuated

LOS ANGELES—The worst rain-fall in nearly a decade continued its deadly assault across the state Tuesday, forcing the evacuation of 5,000 residents in Sacramento County and sending waves of mud into Southern California homes. At least six deaths were blamed on the storm.

Five thousand residents of Rio Linda, 15 miles north of Sacramento, were ordered evacuated when Dry Creek, a tributary of the American River, spilled over its banks. Hundreds of people were sent to shelters in elementary schools and churches.

"Water is almost to the top of street signs in some locations," said sheriff's spokeswoman Sharon Telles.

Gov. Pete Wilson declared states of emergency in 18 counties after a week of Pacific storms that dumped the most rainfall on the state since 1986, when tens of thousands of people were driven from their homes in widespread flooding.

Army National Guard Chinook helicopters plucked residents out of hard-hit Guerneville, about 60 miles north of San Francisco, as the Russian River crested at 17 feet above flood stage.

Brothers Brian and Dave Ridley were on one of the first flights out, both of them cold and hungry.

"Our house is gone," Dave said. "I've been inside my truck for three days."

At least six deaths were blamed on the storm over the past two days, five in Northern California and one in southwestern Oregon.

In Southern California, a body was found in the raging Ventura River but it wasn't immediately known if it was that of a homeless man reported missing.

Nearly 200,000 utility customers

"Our house is gone. I've been inside my truck for three days."

Dave Ridley

flood victim.

were reported to be without power across the state, and repairs were often difficult.

"A lot of times they're under water, and mudslides and landslides are blocking the way," said Diana Gapuz of Pacific Gas & Electric Co.

In Southern California, at least 33 people were pulled from the Ventura and Santa Clara rivers, some by helicopter; three were hospitalized for hypothermia, authorities said.

Many of those rescued were residents of homeless encampments along the river bed. They had been warned on Monday to move to higher ground, but few listened.

"I was coming close to dying," said George Struck, draped in a blanket and shaking violently after he was pulled from the water. "I felt it. I felt it."

In Santa Barbara, 43 residents of a convalescent home were evacuated to a hospital as runoff waters invaded their home before dawn, said police Sgt. Brian Abbott.

In the Hollywood Hills, an elderly couple were sleeping when a wall of mud and a tree hit their home.

"The tree came right into the bedroom, hit them in the bed," said Bob Grebb, whose 71-year-old father,

Harry, and 72-year-old mother, Amella, were in good condition at a hospital.

"It sealed shut the door to the bedroom that leads into the hallway, and I couldn't get to them."

The rainfall turned Los Angeles' morning and evening commutes into even more of a nightmare, flooding intersections and littering freeways with fender-bender accidents, spinouts and overturned vehicles.

Ninety miles of railroad track between Los Angeles and San Luis Obispo were submerged, forcing cancellation of Amtrak service.

Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu was closed because of a thick coating of mud and rock. At Las Flores Canyon, motorists abandoned vehicles as they filled with water.

In Northern California, the storm sent 10-foot boulders hurtling down onto Highway 17, preventing Santa Cruz residents from reaching jobs over the mountains in San Jose and the Silicon Valley.

Commuters who made it to San Jose found the downtown a maze of detours as creeks and rivers overflowed and flooded streets and major highways.

"This was a 500-year rain event," said Gary Ryan of the National Weather Service.

More than 12 1/2 inches of rain fell at Matilija Creek in Ventura County, and wind gusted up to 93 mph atop Black Mountain near Templeton, 220 miles northwest of Los Angeles.

"Most locations have had more than half their annual rainfall in the last seven days," said the weather service's Tim McClung.

Rain was forecast through the weekend.

Food stamp fraud increasing

DETROIT — Scores of shivering poor squeeze into the warmth of a tiny gray building to collect their food stamps, the precious first allotment of the new year.

Then they walk outside and quickly sell the little coupons at a discount to organized rings of cocky street hawkers and crooked grocers, who will redeem the stamps at full value for a neat profit from the U.S. government.

"I see 20-25 percent of the people who come out of there sell their stamps," said Michigan State Police Lt. Lewis Langham, head of a state and federal task force on food stamp fraud. The going rate is 50 cents to 70 cents cash on the dollar.

Since the food stamp program began as an experiment under President Kennedy in 1961, fraud has grown bigger and better organized almost every year. The Secret Service estimates \$2 billion of the \$24 billion in food stamps issued annually are redeemed illegally.

It has also become a motley form of organized crime, with the scams as diverse and complex as local American cultures. The Detroit racket, played out around an east side distribution center, is just one variety in a garden of deceit.

In Akron, Ohio, a ring of grocers systematically laundered hundreds of thousands of dollars in food stamps.

In Albuquerque, N.M., con artists canvass the destitute at homeless shelters, offering to buy their benefits on the cheap.

Restaurants aren't permitted to take food stamps for payment, but in New York City, Chinese takeout restaurants often accept them routinely.

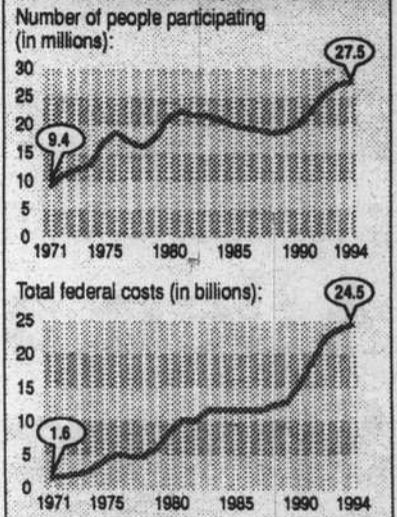
Federal, state and local investigators say virtually every U.S. city has an underground system to divert food stamps, and there is evidence that millions of dollars in food stamp profits have disappeared overseas.

"We're finding million-dollar cases," said Craig Beauchamp, inspector general of the Food and Con-

Food stamp scams

As the number of Americans using food stamps has increased, so has fraudulent use. Investigators say most U.S. cities have underground networks for diverting food stamps and selling them at discount rates.

Food stamp program growth



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture AP/C. Sanderson

sumer Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which runs the food stamp program. "There are more crooks in the program, real crooks."

The Chinese takeout scheme has spread from New York's Chinatown to nearby states, said Joseph Yarrish, a USDA regional inspector general. The restaurants use the discounted stamps to buy meat, vegetables and other supplies from Chinese grocers. The grocers then redeem the coupons at full value or pass them on to wholesalers for supplies. Everybody gets a cut; nobody pays sales taxes.

"That seems to be the hot thing," Yarrish said. "It looks like the Chinese takeouts are out of control, just blatantly taking food stamps."

Grozny cease-fire violated

GROZNY, Russia — Chechen rebels scrambled Tuesday to bury comrades' white-shrouded corpses and reinforce their presidential palace during a cease-fire that collapsed in hours, heralding more fighting ahead.

The proposed 48-hour truce, announced by Moscow early Tuesday, was designed to allow both sides to gather dead and wounded while civilians fled Grozny.

But it proved a fleeting pause in the battle for the Chechen capital, devastated by a month-long siege and 11 days of a Russian ground attack launched to quell a secessionist uprising.

Sniper fire sounded throughout the truce, which crumbled after four hours when salvos of Russian artillery slammed into the city center. Each side immediately blamed the other.

Chechen officials, rejecting Moscow's cease-fire terms as an ultimatum, again insisted on a Russian withdrawal before they would lay down their arms.

The bloodshed showed no sign of abating. Dozens of heavily armed Chechen fighters sheltered in the ravaged palace, where fighting has focused for days, ruled out peace or compromise.

Hundreds of Chechen fighters held positions around the gutted palace and other key locations. Russian forces pressed them from three sides with artillery and tank fire.

Troops from both sides clearly violated the cease-fire not long after it took effect at 8 a.m.

In proposing it, the Russian government reiterated demands that the Chechens lay down their arms and return captured Russian soldiers. The Chechens refused, saying some prisoners were held in the palace.

The Russian news agency RIA reported that Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev had welcomed the truce offer but wanted several new clauses, including opening corridors for food supplies and humanitarian aid. Crucial help for tens of thousands of people who fled the fighting in Chechnya being delayed by Russian officials, who for 10 days kept a team of experts from the area, the U.N.'s refugee agency said in Geneva. Thousands of soldiers and civilians have been killed since Russia began its offensive on Dec. 11 to restore Kremlin authority to the independence-minded, mostly Muslim region in the Caucasus Mountains, 1,000 miles south of Moscow.

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