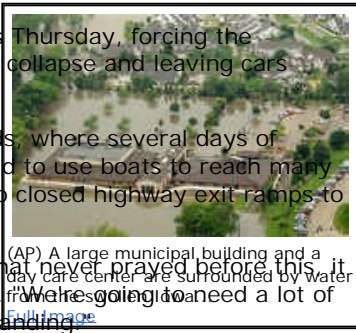


CEDAR RAPIDS, Iowa (AP) - The Cedar River poured over its banks Thursday, forcing the evacuation of more than 3,000 homes, causing a railroad bridge to collapse and leaving cars underwater on downtown streets.

Officials estimated that 100 blocks were underwater in Cedar Rapids, where several days of preparation could not hold back the rain-swollen river. Rescuers had to use boats to reach many stranded residents, and people could be seen dragging suitcases up closed highway exit ramps to escape the water.

"We're just kind of at God's mercy right now, so hopefully people that never prayed before this, it might be a good time to start," Linn County Sheriff Don Zeller said. "We're going to need a lot of prayers and people are going to need a lot of patience and understanding."



(AP) A large municipal building and a day care center are surrounded by water. "We're going to need a lot of prayers and people are going to need a lot of patience and understanding."

Officials estimated that 3,200 homes were evacuated and some 8,000 residents displaced.



(AP) A view of downtown Cedar Rapids, Iowa shows widespread flooding from the raging Cedar River,...

Days of heavy rain across the state have sent the river far across Iowa at or above historic flood levels. Residents were days by steeling themselves for floods before Stinking with the Scary Rules rain across west central Iowa. www.FatLoss4Idiots.com

"We are seeing a historic hydrological emergency with unprecedented river levels occurring. Help bring thousands of food & supplies to midwest flood victims. www.FeedTheChildren.org"

Gov. Chet Culver has declared 55 of the state's 99 counties as state disaster areas.

No deaths or serious injuries were reported in Iowa, but one man was killed in southern Minnesota after his car plunged from a washed-out road into floodwaters. Another person was rescued from a nearby vehicle in the town of Albert Lea.

In Des Moines, officials said they were urging residents to evacuate more than 200 homes north of downtown because of concerns that the Des Moines River would top a nearby levee. Some residents also were ordered to evacuate homes along rivers in Iowa City and Coralville.

In Cedar Rapids, a city of about 124,000, flood waters downtown neared the top of stop signs and cars were nearly covered in water. It wasn't clear just how high the river had risen because a flood gauge was swept away by the swirling water.

"It's going door to door to make sure people don't need to be rescued, because right now they can't get out on their own," said Dave Koch, a spokesman for the Cedar Rapids Fire Department. "It's just too deep."

The surging river caused part of a railroad bridge and about 20 hopper cars loaded with rocks to collapse into the river. The cars had been positioned on the bridge in hopes of weighing it down against the rising water.



(AP) A wooden pallet floats down a flooded street Thursday, June 12, 2008, in downtown Cedar Rapids,...

Joe Childers, an official at a U.S. Bank in downtown Cedar Rapids, was in jeans and tennis shoes as he worked to move documents and other items upstairs or out of the building.

"We're trying to keep water out of as many places as we can," he said. "It's pretty amazing. I don't think anyone really expected it this far."



Prisoners had to be moved from the Linn County jail, including some inmates who had been transferred from the Benton County jail in Vinton because of flooding. The sheriff's office also was under water, Zeller said.

"We've had to move our operations out of the area and to our



(AP) Emergency vehicles line up in the rescue effort at the Little Sioux Scout Ranch can be seen after a... [Full Image](#)

alternate emergency site," Zeller said. "We are just trying to regroup. When you don't have all of your equipment and you don't have all your facilities to operate out of - we're at a little bit of a disadvantage ... but we're carrying on as normal."

Several emergency shelters were opened, and the city had closed all but one of its bridges over the Cedar River.

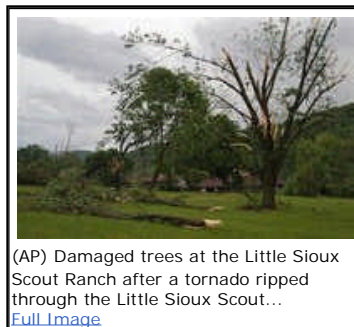
"I believe that this is God's way of doing things, and I've got insurance, so I'm not worried about it," said Tim Grimm, who was forced to leave his home in the city's Czech Village area.

In Austin, Minn., the Cedar River crested 7.4 feet above flood stage. The river went about 5 feet higher in a 2004 flood that caused major damage in the city.

"It seems like we're having the hundred-year flood every four years. It's absurd," said Mark Dulitz, who had 4 inches of water in his basement and a ring of sandbags around his house.

Some businesses and offices were closed, including a Hormel Foods corporate office and its Spam Museum, but floodwaters were already receding by Thursday afternoon. The floodwaters did claim the life of a man whose vehicle became submerged when the road washed out from under it just west of Austin.

Flooding this week also caused damage across southern Wisconsin, where thunderstorms continued pounding the area on Thursday.



(AP) Damaged trees at the Little Sioux Scout Ranch after a tornado ripped through the Little Sioux Scout... [Full Image](#)

Iowa County Emergency Management Director Ken Palzkill said his county saw an "unprecedented" amount of rain Thursday afternoon. He said the village of Cobb got 3 inches of rain in an hour.

Power was shut off to hundreds of people in the village of Avoca, west of Madison, and they were urged to leave their homes after the Wisconsin River and other streams flooded, said Chief Deputy Jon Pepper of the Iowa County Sheriff's Department.



(AP) Firefighters search the wreckage at the Little Sioux Scout Ranch after a tornado ripped through the... [Full Image](#)

The weather service issued flash flood watches for southern Wisconsin with tornado watches in central and eastern areas. Several tornadoes briefly touched down, but no injuries were reported.

Flash flooding in Grant County in the southwestern corner of Wisconsin closed two highways and required rescues, authorities said. Three homes were destroyed and others had major damage from the flooding, which reached several feet deep in spots, said Julie Loeffelholz of Grant County Emergency Management.

Violent thunderstorms Thursday night rattled Michigan's northern Lower Peninsula, where tornado watches and warnings were in effect.

Just southeast of Grand Rapids, Mich., crews pulled the body of a motorist from a car found drifting in the swollen Thornapple River. State police said they believe the 57-year-old man called on his cell phone but didn't say what happened or where he was; they found him using global positioning equipment.

People in several northern Missouri communities, meanwhile, were piling up sandbags to prepare for flooding in the Missouri River, expected to crest over the weekend, and a more significant rise in the Mississippi River expected Wednesday.

Associated Press writers Michael J. Crumb and Melanie S. Welte in Des Moines, Patrick Condon in Austin, Minn., and Dinesh Ramde in Milwaukee contributed to this report.