

December 26, 2003

Search Continues for Mudslide Victims in California

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Filed at 8:06 a.m. ET

SAN BERNARDINO, Calif. (AP) -- Rescue crews slogged past fallen trees and boulders early Friday in a search for at least 10 people missing at a youth camp after a mudslide triggered by heavy rain swept through forested foothills recently scorched by wildfire. More than a dozen others were rescued.

Traveling by foot because a road bridge was washed out, one team climbed up the steep terrain and another descended it in an effort to reach the Saint Sophia Camp in Waterman Canyon, just north of San Bernardino.

Officials were optimistic the weather would be clear enough Friday to bring in helicopters to help with the search.

"There are 10 that we know of that are missing, but there are possibly more that we still are looking for," San Bernardino County Fire Marshall Peter Brierty said on CBS's "The Early Show" Friday. "We can't get into these areas either with either mechanical equipment rescue vehicles, fire engines and even on foot it's extremely difficult, extremely treacherous terrain."

Fourteen people who had been staying at the Greek Orthodox youth camp when the mudslides swept through had been rescued by late Thursday.

"One man was there with his 3-year-old child and said he grabbed the child and watched his wife and his other child wash away," said Kimberly VandenBosch, spokeswoman for St. Bernadine Medical Center in San Bernardino. Ten of those rescued were treated for minor injuries.

The storm dumped more than 3 1/2 inches of rain on areas heavily scarred by wildfires this fall, flooding streets in San Bernardino and elsewhere, cutting power and causing mudslides. The blazes in October and November, the most severe in state history, burned off vegetation that normally would help shore up the steep terrain, leaving the ground prone to mudslides.

Much of Waterman Canyon had been scorched by a blaze that burned more than 91,000 acres, destroyed 993 homes and killed four people.

On Thursday, authorities evacuated residents who live in the canyon and closed off the road leading there. A surging stream of mud and water rushed through the canyon, which looked like a sea of gray mud.

Temperatures had dropped into the 40s, and county Fire Marshall Peter Brierty said rescuers faced "incredibly mushy, muddy, slippery" conditions.

Some of the rescuers were slipping into the mud up to their hips as they tried to navigate the canyon, Brierty said. The debris flows, some more than 6 feet high, contained logs and branches, making them especially dangerous.

“Even a foot or 2 feet of this will knock you down,” he said.

One man was buried waist-deep in mud and debris and trapped beneath a log, county fire Capt. Rick McClintock said. Rescue crews were able to cut the log free and carried the man across a creek, he said.

It wasn't immediately known whether the people at the camp were affiliated with the Greek Orthodox parishes that run the facility or were holiday visitors.

No one answered the phone at the Saint Sophia Camp, and messages left with camp officials were not immediately returned. The camp hosts summer religious retreats for children and other events year-round, according to its Web site.

Elsewhere in the county, a mudslide triggered by the heavy rain damaged and toppled trailers at a campground in Devore. Sheriff's spokeswoman Cindy Beavers said 30 to 50 people suffered minor injuries. Several people were unaccounted for, but authorities said they were not believed to be in danger. In Lytle Creek Canyon, a 4-foot-high mud flow crossed a road, trapping a car. The driver wasn't hurt.

Emergency crews spent much of Christmas Day setting sand bags outside homes and along waterways to contain flood water and diverting traffic from washed out roads.

The Pacific storm began moving into Southern California on Wednesday evening, bringing Los Angeles its first rainy Christmas Day in two decades.

Strong wind gusts downed power lines in parts of Los Angeles and San Bernardino, cutting power to more than 67,000 customers.

Mudslides derailed an empty freight train in the Cajon Pass near Los Angeles and shut down two main tracks between the Los Angeles basin and points east that serve about 100 trains a day, said Lena Kent, a spokeswoman for Burlington Northern and A&D Santa Fe Railway. There were no reports of injuries.

In downtown Los Angeles, storm winds blew eight stories of scaffolding down onto parked cars, damaging the vehicles but causing no injuries.

[Copyright 2003 The Associated Press](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Help](#) | [Back to Top](#)