

Obama tours tornado-hit Oklahoma City suburb, says area will recover

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USPA News - U.S. President Barack Obama on Sunday traveled to the Oklahoma City metropolitan area to meet with the victims of a massive tornado that killed 24 people and destroyed more than 1,200 homes earlier this month, making it the country's worst tornado disaster since 2011. Air Force One landed at Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma City at 11:43 a.m. local time on Sunday after which Obama was greeted by Governor Mary Fallin, FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate, Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett and other local officials.

He was also met with a line of families and Obama shook hands with many of them, including police officers and children. Obama arrived in Moore, the Oklahoma City suburb that was badly hit by the massive EF5 tornado, at around 12:30 p.m. local time for a walk through one of the most devastated neighborhoods. The tornado, which killed 24 people and injured nearly 380 others, also destroyed a hospital, schools and some 1,200 homes in addition to damaging more than 12,000 other buildings. The president walked about a block along Eagle Drive through what was described as utter devastation. "The elementary school was on his left as he stopped at a couple of piles of remains, with Governor Fallin on his left and Craig Fugate on his right," said Michael Shear, a New York Times correspondent who traveled with Obama. Shear said Obama had a "grim look on his face" as he toured the neighborhood, where some residents had planted American flags in piles of rubble. Items such as elementary school yearbooks, textbooks, baby dolls strollers, and waterlogged encyclopedias were scattered amid the piles of debris. Obama also visited Plaza Towers Elementary School where he met with families and first responders before going to Moore Fire Department Station #1 that has served as a command center throughout the disaster. He there met with Moore Fire Chief Gary Bird, other local officials, first responders who took part in the rescue operation, and families of children who died at Plaza Towers Elementary School. "Obviously, a picture is worth a thousand words, and what we're seeing here I think gives you some sense of what the people of Moore and the people of Oklahoma have been dealing with over these last several days," Obama said. "Let me begin by just saying that whenever I come to an area that's been devastated by some natural disaster like this, I want to make sure everybody understands I'm speaking on behalf of the entire country." The president, who called himself a messenger for other Americans who want to help the tornado victims, described the damage in Moore as hard to comprehend. "Our hearts go out to the families who have been impacted, including those who had loved ones who were lost," he said. "And that was true for the parents of some of the children here at Plaza Towers Elementary School." Obama commended local and state officials and praised first responders for putting themselves at risk to save other people's lives. "That's what first responders do, but sometimes we take them for granted, and it's important we don't and we remember moments like that," he said. "That's why it's so important that we continually support them." Hours after the storm hit, Obama signed a disaster declaration to free up resources and support for state and local officials, as well as assistance to the individuals affected by the tornado. He approved additional assistance for the state on Tuesday, implementing a debris removal pilot program in which the federal government covers 85 percent of debris removal assistance during the first 30 days. "From the forecasters who issued the warnings, to the first responders who dug through the rubble, to the teachers who shielded with their own bodies their students, Oklahomans have inspired us with their love and their courage and their fellowship," Obama said on Sunday. "Neighbors have been offering up spare bedrooms and couches for those in need of shelter. Universities have opened up their buildings for temporary housing. And local companies have pitched in." Obama added: "This is a strong community with strong character. There's no doubt they're going to bounce back. But they need help -- just like any of us would need help if we saw the kind of devastation that we're seeing here. It's going to take a long time for this community to rebuild."

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