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Five Killed, Dozens Injured as Stage Collapses at Indiana State Fair

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The summer evening at the Indiana State Fair turned strangely cold. The wind blew hard, then harder still, tearing the fabric from the roof of the wobbling grandstand stage.

The crowd, waiting under a thunderous sky for the country duo Sugarland to perform Saturday, had just been told over the loudspeakers that severe weather was possible. They were told where to seek shelter if an evacuation was necessary, but none was ordered. The show, it seemed, was to go on.

None of the phone calls workers had made to the National Weather Service prepared them for the 60 to 70 mph gust that blew a punishing cloud of dirt, dust and rain down the fairground's main thoroughfare. The massive rigging and lighting system covering the stage tilted forward, then plummeted onto the front of the crowd in a sickening thump.

Five people were killed, four of them at the scene, where dozens ran forward to help the injured while others ran for shelter out of fear that the devastation had only begun. Dozens of people -- including several children -- remained hospitalized Sunday, some with life-threatening injuries.

"Women were crying. Children were crying. Men were crying," fairgoer Mike Zent said.

The fair canceled all activities Sunday as officials began the long process of determining what happened and fielded difficult questions about whether the tragedy could have been prevented.

"We're all very much in mourning," Cindy Hoye, the fair's executive director, said during a news conference Sunday. "It's a very sad day at the state fair."

Gov. Mitch Daniels called the accident an "unthinkable tragedy" and said the wind burst was a "fluke" that no one could have foreseen. Dan McCarthy, chief meteorologist for the National Weather Service in Indiana, said the burst of wind was far stronger than gusts in other areas of the fairgrounds.

The seemingly capricious nature of the gust was evident Sunday at the fair, where crews placed a blue drape around the grandstand to block the view of the wreckage. A striped tent nearby appeared unscathed, as did an aluminum trailer about 50 yards away. The Ferris wheel on the midway also escaped damage.

First Sgt. Dave Bursten of the Indiana State Police said the lack of damage to structures on the fair's midway or elsewhere supported the weather service's belief that an isolated, significant wind gust caused the rigging to topple.

"All of us know without exception in Indiana the weather can change from one report to another report, and that was the case here," he said.

The stage toppled at 8:49 p.m. A timeline released by Indiana State Police shows that fair staff contacted the weather service four times between 5:30 and 8 p.m. At 8 p.m., the weather service said a storm with hail and 40 mph winds was expected to hit the fairgrounds at 9:15 p.m.

Bursten said fair officials had begun preparing in case they needed to evacuate visitors for the impending storm. At 8:30, additional state troopers moved to the grandstand to help in the event of an evacuation, according to the timeline.

Meteorologist John Hendrickson said it's not unusual for strong winds to precede a thunderstorm, and that Saturday's gust might have been channeled through the stage area by buildings on either side of the dirt track where the stage fell, at the bottom of the grandstand.

Fair officials said the Indiana Occupational Health and Safety Administration and state fire marshal's office were investigating. Bursten said the investigation could take months.

The owner of Mid-America Sound Corp., which installed the rigging, expressed sympathy for the families of those killed or injured. Kerry Darrenkamp also said the Greenfield, Ind.-based company had begun "an independent internal investigation to understand, to the best of our ability, what happened."

Zent, of Los Angeles, said the storm instantly transformed what had been a hot, sunny day.

"Just everything turned black. ... It was really cold, it was like winter, because I had been sweating all day. Wind blew over the ATM machine," Zent said.

He and his girlfriend, Jess Bates, were behind the grandstand when he heard a noise -- the stage collapse. They began running as



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the wind buffeted them.

Bates said a woman who had been in the second row of the concert with her teenage daughter grabbed her and sobbed as she recounted pulling her daughter to safety while others rushed forward to try to help those pinned beneath the scaffolding.

"She was gripping me very tight, and I could just feel her shaking," Bates said. "She said, 'My daughter is all I have in this world and I almost lost her tonight,'" Bates said.

Dr. Dean Silas, a gastroenterologist from Deerfield, Ill., said it took about five minutes to work his way from the grandstands to the track after the collapse. He saw three bodies covered with plastic when he arrived.

He said it took about 25 minutes for volunteers and emergency workers to remove victims from beneath the rigging and load them onto makeshift stretchers.

"There had to be 75 to 100 people there helping out," he said.

Bursten identified those killed as Alina Bigjohny, 23, of Fort Wayne; Christina Santiago, 29, of Chicago; Tammy Vandam, 42, of Wanatah; and two Indianapolis residents: 49-year-old Glenn Goodrich and 51-year-old Nathan Byrd. Byrd, a stagehand who was atop the rigging when it fell, died overnight.

Jennifer Nettles of Sugarland sent a statement to The Associated Press through her marketing manager, saying she watched video of the collapse on the news "in horror."

"I am so moved," she said. "Moved by the grief of those families who lost loved ones. Moved by the pain of those who were injured and the fear of their families. Moved by the great heroism as I watched so many brave Indianapolis fans actually run toward the stage to try and help lift and rescue those injured. Moved by the quickness and organization of the emergency workers who set up the triage and tended to the injured."

Jason Owen, who manages marketing, press and creative for the band, said Sugarland was in a prayer circle before their performance. The band members were held off stage by the tour manager because of the weather before the stage collapsed.

Sugarland -- Nettles and Kristian Bush -- canceled their Sunday show at the Iowa State Fair.

Concert-goers and other witnesses said an announcer warned them of impending bad weather but gave conflicting accounts of whether emergency sirens at the fair sounded. Some fair workers said they never heard any warnings.

"It's pathetic. It makes me mad," said groundskeeper Roger Smith. "Those lives could have been saved yesterday."

Fair spokesman Andy Klotz said the damage was so sudden and isolated that he wasn't sure sirens would have done any good.

Indiana is prone to volatile changes in weather. In April 2006, tornado-force winds hit Indianapolis just after thousands of people left a free outdoor concert by John Mellencamp held as part of the NCAA men's Final Four basketball tournament. And in May 2004, a tornado touched down south of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, delaying the start of the Indianapolis 500 and forcing a nearly two-hour interruption in the race.

Daniels stood by the fair and its officials as they prepared to reopen Monday with a public memorial service to honor the victims.

"This is the finest event of its kind in America, this is the finest one we've ever had, and this desperately sad ... fluke event doesn't change that," he said.

Sunday's accident was the worst at the Indiana fairgrounds since a 1963 explosion at the fairgrounds coliseum killed 74 people attending an ice skating show.

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