

14 deaths are blamed on heat wave

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The South sweltered through a fifth day of record-shattering heat that has killed 14 people and thunderstorms sparked fires and knocked out power to about 1,000 people in Charlotte, N.C.

Tropical Storm Barry chugged toward Florida and workers at the Kennedy Space Center secured the shuttle Challenger for an assault of 55-mph winds.

Most of the South suffered through the fifth day of temperatures in the 100s Wednesday but violent thunderstorms dropped the temperature 15 degrees in North Carolina, which baked for four straight days.

The thunderstorms sparked fires, knocked out power and contributed to the death of a Charlotte, N.C., woman whose car skidded on a rain-slick street.

Two and a half inches of rain created "total chaos" in Charlotte one day after record 103-degree temperatures, a police officer said. Lightning hit six houses and a business and knocked out traffic lights and power to about 1,000 people.

Forecasters said the storms spelled only brief relief from the heat wave.

"It will stay hot at least for the next couple days," said forecaster Hugh Crowther at the National Severe Storms Forecast Center. "Tropical Storm Barry could break it if it spreads some clouds and thunderstorms across the south Atlantic Coast region."

Barry swirled 80-mph winds at Cape Canaveral, Fla., where NASA officials said they had no time to move Challenger off the launch pad and were forced to ride out the storm.

"We're going to be riding it out on the pad," said NASA spokesman Jim Ball, noting Challenger was built to withstand 80-mph winds.

Weather officials said there was a 46 percent chance the full brunt of the storm might slam Cape Canaveral full blast. Challenger is to lift off next Tuesday.

Further north, the Navy and the Air Force planned to evacuate 5,000 people on 15 ships and submarines and more than 50 cargo planes if Barry threatened Charleston, S.C.

Southern cities sweltered. Montgomery, Ala., reported a record 102 and thousands of Arkansas school children along the Mississippi River left class early to beat the heat.

In Lenoir, N.C., officials said high temperatures and humidity caused about 35 people to faint during a food giveaway.