

Two dead, 30 missing after heavy rains cause severe flooding in France and Italy

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Flood waters surge through Saint-Martin-Vesubie, southeastern France, after heavy rains and flooding hit the Alpes-Maritimes department. (Photo: AFP)

Paris, October 4 (RHC)-- Two people have died and 30 others gone missing after storms lashed southern France and northern Italy with roads and bridges damaged or destroyed and thousands left without

power.

Torrential rain of up to 50 centimeters (20 inches) and high winds crashed into the border area between the two countries in the worst storms in years.

Storm Alex barreled into France's west coast on Thursday, bringing powerful winds and rain across the country before moving off into Italy, where regions across the north suffered an onslaught throughout Saturday.

A volunteer firefighter died in Italy's Aosta Valley and a man was killed after his car was washed away in the Sesia River, about 100 kilometers (60 miles) further east. Eight people were recorded missing around the French city of Nice and 22 more in Italian border areas. Dozens of firefighters were trying to reach one Italian village by train after the road was shut.

On the French side, rescue efforts were also being hampered after sections of roads collapsed. "You can also see a few houses that are perched above the void because the riverbed has washed away the road," said a fire brigade spokesman.

Switzerland was also battered with record rainfall in some areas and powerful gusts, forcing the closure of roads and mountains.

French Prime Minister Jean Castex, who inspected the damage around Nice by helicopter, said there were eight people officially designated missing, but a great many more who were out of contact.

"I do not hide from you our deep concern about the final outcome of this episode," he said, adding that the government had triggered its emergency plan for handling natural disasters. "The situation is catastrophic in some communes," regional lawmaker Eric Ciotti told reporters.

Authorities in the southern Alpes-Maritimes region had been placed on alert Friday and around 12,000 people in three valleys to the north of Nice were without power early Saturday afternoon.

"We are thunderstruck. We saw the (river) Vesubie burst its banks - everything was swept away, including part of the old iron bridge," Serge Franco, a resident of Roquebilliere, some 50 km (30 miles) north of Nice, told the media as rescue helicopters hovered overhead.

"My house is habitable but half of my land has been swept away," said another resident, Guillaume Andre, who was evacuated overnight but returned to see the devastation after daybreak.

Meanwhile, the Italian city of Venice was expecting to be submerged by an occasional tidal peak known as "acqua alta" but a network of 78 artificial dykes managed to hold the waters back.

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