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Jeddah needs good sewage network

Abeer Mishkhas | Arab News

It took devastation on a large scale to get the government officials moving in Jeddah. Years of complaining about the effects of seasonal rain and the notorious Musk Lake never managed to prod them into action. They simply sat around in their luxurious offices and issued statements to the effect that things would be OK, and that they were working on a sewage system that was apparently imaginary. But what happened on the first day of Eid seems to have shocked these officials. King Abdullah's order to start an investigation into Jeddah's tragedy is going to scare all those who have been avoiding their duties and shake them into doing their jobs.

Now people get fed information every day on what is happening to clear up the mess left by the rain, and all the precautions taken to prevent any leaking from the Musk Lake, which is very reassuring and refreshing, one must say. I just hope that this spirit does not evaporate in the coming days, as has been the case in the past. After all, enthusiasm in Saudi Arabia has a short life.

Although the work to alleviate people's suffering is impressive, one new item sent cold waves of dread down my spine. I read in the local press that the municipality has started diverting excess water from the lake into the sea. As one colleague said, "It seems they've chosen to harm the fish to spare the people."

And harm the fish that action certainly will, not to mention the coral reefs and everything that lives there. Did anyone think of the environment, or people's health? Or of the efforts that are being made to put Saudi Arabia on the world tourism map? Diving in Jeddah was one major attraction to tourists and to the foreigners who live in the Kingdom.

Even if this were the only immediate course of action possible, the problem it creates could be far worse. Contaminating the sea with human waste seems to be replacing the Musk Lake with a bigger container for the sewage. This time the effects might not be immediate, but will certainly appear later on. If people who live around the lake used to complain of the stench, I suppose now all of Jeddah will join the chorus. That is one sure way of spreading the burden!

One wonders if Jeddah is ever going to see the promised sewage system. Is it really that hard for the second biggest city in Saudi Arabia to have a functioning sewage network? Last week's events were shocking on several levels and all of them very serious, but there is one question from people from other countries I've heard several times. "How can this happen in Saudi Arabia?" a journalist asked me, adding, "My idea of Jeddah has changed now, I thought it was a modern city." Another compared Jeddah with impoverished cities elsewhere, and pointed out that those cities don't have similar problems getting rid of their waste.

To those people I could not say much really, as I don't have a clue why that system has not been implemented. It is not enough to call Jeddah the Bride of the Red Sea and show people pictures of the new buildings and shopping centers, because what we've been trying to hide has just

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blown up in our faces in the most humiliating way.

On a more positive note, however, we can at least say that the week's events have changed a few things. The way people expressed themselves, for example, strongly condemning the corruption that has deprived Jeddah for years of the promised proper drainage and sewage system. The voice of the people was heard through newspapers and the Internet. People filmed the events of the day with their mobile cameras and uploaded them onto the Internet for the world to see. Somehow, as you watch those tragic videos, you recognize that things will never be the same, and this is what is implied by the immediate government response to people's worries. Now it remains to be seen if the government's promises are kept and long-overdue action is taken.

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