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Residents of flood-ravaged districts need safer shelters

Arab news

JEDDAH: As the Arab News team walked through the muddied narrow streets of Kilo 14 and stepped into the homes destroyed by the deluge of Nov. 25, one urgent thought persisted in our minds: These people need to be moved into safe shelters so that their homes and streets can be cleared from the wreckage filling them. Whatever little money and aid is coming from charitable people, as much as it is needed, seemed pointless.

On Saturday, the residents continued to clean their damaged homes with their bare hands. In many places, the waters that swept into homes reached two meters high and when it flushed out through the door and walls, it took everything with it, leaving behind only broken furniture and appliances. If it were not for the bravery of the residents in rescuing each other, especially the women, elderly and infants, many more would have died as the water carried them away.

Streets and alleyways, too, were badly damaged. Navigating through the mud, potholes and piles of debris was difficult and will continue to pose a health threat, especially if more rain falls.

The pools of stagnant water in the alleys, the piles of dirt, the broken furniture, the pieces of woods and glass, the rubber tires, the smashed cars, all these are sources of diseases and other environmental hazards; rats scuttled about in the debris, snakes squirmed through the mud and insects and mosquitoes hovered everywhere. Thousands from the Quw aizah and Al-Saw aed areas whose homes were ruined and became inhabitable with no electricity or running water, have been placed in furnished apartments. We were also told on Saturday that the Civil Defense provided flood victims with bottled water and some cup cakes (the latter reminded one reporter of a famous line from French history).

Thousands and thousands more people still need temporary housing as they repair their damaged homes. Furthermore, many of the residents in Kilo 14 and the other Kilo areas are non-Saudis. Those residents claim some officials are telling them that Saudi citizens get priority in aid shelter. Other foreigners are without proper residential documents, so they fear approaching the authorities.

On a brighter note, it is gratifying to see the charity and civil society organizations and volunteers doing what they can to provide the basic necessities.

A wedding hall in Kilo 14 has been turned into a distribution center for the donations in-kind such as blankets, mattresses, pillows, clothes, shoes, canned food, bottled water, and meals. Officers were guarding the place for fear of chaos.

These efforts are urgent relief measures, but are temporary solutions. Plans should be made and immediately implemented to remove the residents from the damaged and destroyed homes and put into available safe locations that can accommodate huge numbers for a period of time long enough to clean up and rebuild.

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