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Saudi flood death inquiry opens

By Sebastian Usher
BBC News

Saudi officials have launched an investigation into the handling of last month's flooding in Jeddah that killed at least 150 people.

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, who ordered the inquiry, has said that those responsible will be punished.

There is intense anger in Jeddah over the death and destruction caused by the heavy rainstorm at the end of November.

Many blame local authorities for not providing basic protection from floods or acting fast enough when they came.

Mood turning

The scale of the disaster is only now being revealed.

Video footage posted on YouTube shows huge 4x4 cars being swept away in the floods with their passengers still inside.

Saudi authorities say more than 150 people died, but many in Jeddah say hundreds more are likely to have lost their lives.

In an unusually strong statement, Saudi King Abdullah said it was painful that less developed countries faced similar rainfall but did not suffer such devastation.

Most of the Saudi media - which is owned or controlled by members of the Saudi royal family - praised the king for launching an investigation.

But some newspapers, especially English-language dailies, have been sceptical - one writer said the rain would be blamed for falling and the people who died for dying.

The result of the investigation may see some members of the local government named and shamed.

But the endemic corruption that Saudis privately hold responsible for the disaster, and for the fact that no adequate drainage was in place in Jeddah, is unlikely to be tackled in any systematic way.

Some in Saudi Arabia have described what is happening with the public mood as a turning point - with Saudis for once forcing the authorities to take responsibility for their mistakes.

But any criticism will only go so far. What is certain is that no blame will be attached to King Abdullah and the Saudi royal family - that remains a taboo.



A downpour on 25 November sparked deadly flash floods



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