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Genesis of the Jeddah tragedy

Samar Fatany | Arab News

The city of Jeddah is in mourning and its residents are in rage and utter frustration over the corruption, reckless attitude and indifference of government officials and public servants who have caused an unforgivable tragedy of death, destruction and ruin. The residents are angry over the failure of officials to build a proper infrastructure for the city of Jeddah and their neglect of urban planning. This is what brought out this calamity. The looming dangers were presented again and again by environmentalists, researchers, businessmen and people of conscience. Reports have been submitted and extensive research has been conducted that foretold all that we witnessed on Wednesday, Nov. 25, 2009. Moreover, the residents of this city are angry over the failure of government departments to provide swift and professional help to minimize the loss of lives and curb the devastating destruction of homes and property.

King Abdullah's compassionate address to the city of Jeddah and his promise to punish those responsible, his million-riyal compensation to the families of the dead, and the provision of homes for the displaced families have somewhat calmed the rage of the residents and provided some solace to many. However, no one will rest in peace until those responsible for this disaster paid for their criminal behavior.

Meanwhile, the citizens have become more vigilant in monitoring the work of government departments. They have mobilized efforts to provide relief and aid for the distressed and needy.

Media professionals, concerned citizens, activists and young volunteers held an emergency meeting to devise a strategy in order to confront the dangerous situation and bring calm and awareness to the frightened and devastated victims. In a heated discussion, representatives of each group have vowed never to allow this man-made tragedy to happen again. The young volunteers who have witnessed the death and destruction were very outspoken and weary of the policy of their elders who were passive in dealing with their problems and concerns. These youth represented a new breed of young Saudis who are the products of the Internet age and are well aware of the powers of citizen journalism. They are emboldened by bloggers Twitter and Facebook. The Internet has exposed them to more advanced communities and they are not willing to follow blindly the footsteps of their fathers whose silence allowed corruption to creep into their society in the first place. Their young and angry voices criticized the lack of accountability and the mismanagement of government resources.

Social activists are more optimistic. They believe the lesson from this tragedy could usher in an era of a more active civil society that would take on the task to monitor the performance of government officials and expose corruption and deceit. This group has already started to mobilize its efforts to create public awareness, protect human rights and address the needs of society in a more scientific and professional manner. They are of the opinion that such a tragedy had to happen before any constructive reforms could take place. It is time the state recognized the need to activate the role of civil society and allowed pressure groups to lobby for laws and policies that serve the interests

Prince Ahmed Bin Salman



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of society and guarantee a life of dignity and prosperity for all citizens.

Media professionals stressed that the role of the media is to voice the concerns of citizens, address their needs and expose the failures of the state to provide better services for the flood victims. They have taken on the task to project search and rescue operations, highlight the heroic acts of many individuals who were instrumental in saving lives or offered services to ease the hardships of the people who are still living in the ruins.

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he media are also engaged in keeping the public aware of the existing dangers and providing accurate information with pictures and live images of the devastated districts. It continues to expose the inefficiency of government departments, the inadequate equipment and the unavailability of expertise that could have offered logistical and necessary professional support.

Saudi media have come a long way in providing a more professional service that has served public interests. Professionals in the field and opinion writers should be commended for their active role during this crisis in voicing public anger and concerns.

The absence of monitoring bodies that supervise the implementation of government reforms and services, or supervisory committees that check the conduct of people in public office has made it more imperative for the media and civil society to play the role of watchdogs in order to protect human rights and expose the negligence and corruption that run deep in some government departments, organizations and public institutions. It is time to activate the role of civil societies by issuing licenses to allow them to address legal, social, professional and intellectual needs of all citizens.

This tragedy has exposed the glaring incompetence, complacency, and lack of expertise among the officials and public servants. The government should recognize the need to bring in international experts who can provide global standards to implement reforms. We cannot deny that the incompetence and negligence of some major decision-makers have allowed this tragedy to take place. They have embarrassed our country before the world. It is certainly unacceptable for a country like Saudi Arabia with its abundant resources to allow this kind of injustice to be inflicted upon its people.

The inquiry commission will soon announce its findings of where things went wrong and who is to blame. Maybe then we can find solace and learn to forget this nightmare that took away the lives of over a hundred or more.

The people of Saudi Arabia have confidence in King Abdullah. He has initiated action to root out corruption and implement much-needed reforms. But the people have to play their role to make his efforts successful.

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