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Lack of disaster-management planning led to present crisis

Maha Akeel | Arab News

JEDDAH: At a meeting of charity and civil society organizations involved in providing assistance to the victims of the Nov. 25 Jeddah flash flooding, everyone came to the same conclusion: A lack of disaster-management planning was a key component to the extent of the damage and loss of life.

Seventeen charity and civil society organizations met Wednesday evening at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) to organize their efforts after a few days of spontaneous but much appreciated mobilized work to collect and distribute donations in the affected areas. This followed a warning issued by the Makkah Governorate cautioning individuals and groups against donating haphazardly and instead directed them to give their donations through registered charity organizations, which are supposed to coordinate their distribution work with the Jeddah Governorate to ensure that the donations reach those who need them.

Mazen Batarji, a board member of JCCI and head of Al-Bir Society, one of the largest charity organizations in the Kingdom, chaired the meeting attended by other board and JCCI staff members in addition to a representative of the Makkah Governorate and Civil Defense and some of the damaged neighborhood chiefs.

Discussions quickly revealed a lack of coordination among the charities and with the relevant government offices, namely the Civil Defense and the governorate. While several charities focused on the hardest hit areas such as Kilo 14 and Quw aizah, which needed every parcel of assistance it could get, other areas that were also hit hard were almost neglected. It turns out that Al-Saw aed, which has become a ghost town with only ruins, and all the Kilo areas and Mahameed were in bad shape. Poor neighborhoods in downtown Jeddah such as Ghulail and Karantina were also stricken with residents living in knee-high stinking sewage with barely the essentials to live by. Other areas hit hard include Um Alsalam, Bahra, Jamaa, Al-Musaid.

Meanwhile, charity members complained that some officers tried to block their access to the devastated areas. It has been promised that an officer would be assigned to accompany each charity group to provide access anywhere they want. The JCCI will also issue the charity groups badges for access.

There were other surprising complaints and observations. During the two days following the rain, the emergency number 998 was not answering. Charity members also observed that rescue officers refused to assist stranded women without their mahram (male guardian) and non-Saudis. The volunteers also complained about being questioned why men and women were in the same car.

At the end of the meeting an executive committee was formed with representatives of nine charities (on behalf of all the charities and civil societies) who will have an operations room set up for them at the JCCI to act as liaisons between their field members and volunteers and the relevant government offices. The JCCI also set up the Exhibition Center

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as the focal point for collecting donations in-kind from individuals and companies, which are then sent to the charities according to the needs in the affected areas. The areas were divided among the charities and their volunteer groups so that all the areas are covered in receiving the aid they need. The charities will coordinate and cooperate with the Civil Defense in setting up field centers for information and donations.

The JCCI also established a structure for organizing the rescue efforts during the past few days. In addition to the committee formed to coordinate the charities work, which was the last committee it formed, it has already established a committee for conducting the field surveys, determining the needs and documenting the damage and destruction in each location and home; a sheltering committee which listed the available furnished apartments and negotiated with the owners; a relief and supplies committee which set up the Exhibition Center; and a health committee which is concerned with providing health care to the victims and spraying insecticides in the areas polluted with sewage water and decayed corpses. The Civil Defense has been doing its heavy-duty work of rescuing, finding the dead and clearing the wreckage; but it is the charities, especially the women's societies, and even those charities whose normal functions do not involve providing donations such as the Family Protection Society or Zamzam for Volunteer Medical Care or the Productive Families Society in addition to the Community Centers, that have been quick to act and reach the victims with their donations and support. The volunteers through organizations such as World Assembly of Muslim Youth, Muwatana and Friends of Jeddah have also been extremely helpful in doing the field surveys, distributing the donations and cleaning the homes.



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