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Public outrage

Jeddah flood disaster: who is going to try who?

Saudis call for holding officials accountable as King Abdullah sets up high-level committee to probe catastrophe.

By Habib Trabelsi - PARIS

Saudi King Abdullah set up a high-level committee to investigate the catastrophic flash flood in Jeddah last week that killed at least 106 people and sparked a rare burst of public outrage who accused some municipalities of corruption, neglect and indifference.

Saudi citizens are asking whether the investigation would include high officials as they keep venting their anger on the internet, including Facebook.

King Abdullah also ordered that the family of each of the flood disaster's victims be compensated with one million Saudi riyals (\$267,000).

"Watan" new spaper reported that a committee chaired by Prince Khaled bin Faysal, Mecca governor, will hold its first meeting on Saturday and that the investigation would be retroactive and include both current and former staff in various departments concerned.

The fight against corruption is like the war on terror

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The Saudi monarch's decision sparked a barrage of compliments and praise on new spapers and w ebsites.

"Watan" likened the King's decision of w ar on corruption to the w ar on terror declared by former US President George Bush follow ing the events of September 11, 2001.

"Jeddah disaster's events are our differentiating sign" w as the headline of Watan's editorial of Wednesday, saying that "w hat happened in Jeddah cannot in any w ay go unnoticed nor can the bodies of more than 100 martyrs go in vain."

"It is a historic decision that strengthens the principle of transparency and came as a salve that heals the w ounds of the saddening Wednesday disaster, w rote "Riyadh", adding that "the royal decision put things in their perspective and brought a smile to those affected as the King's resoluteness w ipes the Mermaid' tears" in reference to Jeddah's nickname (Mermaid of the Red Sea).

All new spapers published numerous articles, full of hundreds of comments, most of w hich hailing "unprecedented the royal initiative" and "declaring w ar officially against corruption and the corrupt."

Mufti and human rights

In a statement to "Okaz", the Grand Mufti of the Kingdom, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Sheikh, urged the committee to make sure to show the truth and give the results to the King.

The National Society for Human Rights praised the Royal Order, calling it "a just humanitarian gesture to the victims' families, w hich is characterized by the courage and clarity."

The human rights body told Al-Hayat new spaper about the poor" performance of the "General Presidency of Meteorology and Environment besides the Civil Defense w hich w as late in reaching the affected areas amid a clear absence of emergency and the lack of sites to shelter the affected people and provide a service of rations and health care for them.

The absence of Red Crescent teams w as also registered in addition to the lack of accommodation for residents of some destroyed areas.

It's not just to calm anger, but ...

"The decision is not aimed at just sucking the reactions of the incident and its outcome in terms of losses of lives and belongings, said Ahmed Jumaiyah in article "Riyadh".

"We need to urgently create a national authority to fight corruption and approve the draft system against the abuse of public funds and pow er, w hich w as proposed by the

authority of control and investigation, studied in the authority of experts, referred to the Shura Council and returned to the Council of Ministers two years ago," added Jumaiyah.

Turki al-Dakhil expressed similar concerns in an article in "Watan", telling King Abdullah: "O Abu Mataab, your love grew more among people. But we hope that this Commission will not die with other Commissions, inquiry with other inquiries. Many people fear that this Commission will know a similar fate as other Commissions, which failed to deliver concrete results throughout their existence."

"Our people have had enough from a lot of speech and government and press statements. We are like this; we get scared whenever accidents, disasters and shocks happen. Scientists and specialists have repeatedly warned against the catastrophe, but officials were oblivious," said Saad Hussein.

"We hope the speech is not just a consolation to the martyrs' families. The investigation and accountability are part of the State's duties. If this does not happen after this disaster, we can wave goodbye to our homes," said another Saudi citizen.

Abu Amr Al-Thabiti went father, calling on Abu Mataab to apply the principle of (from where did you get this?).

"We call for a national control apparatus that supervises ministers and senior officials, the State budget and follows up the implementation of projects besides investigating the shortcomings of these projects before a council open to the media and people as is the case in many developed countries ... we hope rather dream it will happen," added Thabiti added.

"Do not be optimistic! It is very difficult to fight corruption," replied Ebadi.

Who is going to try who?

In a rare article of honesty and courage in Al-Hayat entitled "Who will try who?", Badriya Bashar wondered: "Who is able to say that Jeddah's problems concern the city alone and that any city in Saudi Arabia is next on the list God forbid? What Jeddah is going through is experienced by many cities of the Kingdom."

"The war on corruption, which has been waged by King Abdullah since he took the helm, is a fierce war that neither will bear fruit in one day and night nor will it succeed if it is just dealing with temporary crises that will sacrifice some names to relieve pain and alleviate anger," said Bashar.

"Many crises passed without blaming any official, but rather giving an unprecedented protection to the accused. Not a

single minor official was sacrificed in those crises because if convicted, they will drag a list of officials with them. The small official will say he is cleared of responsibility the day he submitted the report and nobody took it into consideration.

"Who will try who? How are the Commissions of seeking the truth and charging the accusations going to be formed?" asked Badriya, adding that "we are entangled in the time of administrative corruption with a big mistake: we appoint the enemy to be the referee!"

The article earned praise and admiration of many readers.

Be blessed my sister with this approach, said one reader. This is an important and vital question!! We are afraid that thieves are that the protectors themselves as the idiom says.

"But with the existence of such noble leadership, thieves will not go unpunished, God willing," she added.

To avoid the expected pressure on the Commission to exclude the influential people, according to another reader, it may be appropriate for the Royal to oblige the Commission to raise any call, received document or intervention sent to it to King Abdullah.

"Movement for Islamic Reform" urges Jeddah citizens to "learn from the disaster"

The London-based Movement for Islamic Reform called on Jeddah citizens to learn from the catastrophe, putting the blame on the Saudi monarch and his brothers in a "special statement" published on its website.

The Movement listed a series of "facts" that show "technical errors" in Jeddah's infrastructure and the "chaos in planning" which cost the State more than 30 billion riyals.

The Movement, led by Saad al-Faqih, stressed that "Jeddah and the whole country will not be rescued from disasters and calamities unless there is a comprehensive political change", urging Jeddah citizens in particular and people in general to gather in the mosques as it will announce further details soon.

The Movement, which accuses the Saudi regime of corruption and deviation from Islamic law, succeeded in organizing rallies in several cities in Saudi Arabia in October 2003 and which were dispersed by riot police with batons.

In 2004, the security forces prevented two demonstrations called by the Movement in Riyadh and Jeddah.

In the last few years, the Movement has consistently call on its supporters to protest peacefully through gathering in the

mosques during Friday prayers.

[This article is translated by **Dr. Saad Guerraoui**, Senior Editor at *Middle East Online*].

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