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Rains claim 24 lives in Jeddah

Arab News

JEDDAH: At least 24 people were reportedly killed and several injured in flash floods in Jeddah on Wednesday. Hundreds of homes and shops were flooded as streets turned into raging rivers.



IN TROUBLED WATERS: A flooded road in Jeddah after the downpour. (AN photo by Abdullah Bazuhair)

Altogether, some 70 millimeters of rain fell over the city in less than two hours — more than two-thirds of the Kingdom's annual average rainfall.

Jeddah Gov. Prince Mishaal bin Majed ordered an emergency control room to be set up to monitor the situation every 12 hours.

In Abraq Al-Raghama district, near the university, entire families were forced onto their roofs to escape the rising floodwaters, polluted by sewage flushed out of the drains. As elsewhere in the city, the drainage system was unable to cope with the load of water.

The city's Civil Defense services were stretched to the limit to deal with the emergency. Throughout the day, boats and helicopters were brought in to help rescue people. By nightfall many victims were still on their roofs.

In the city's Safa district and other areas homes were without electricity from around 2 a.m. Wednesday. Residents contacted the emergency services of the Saudi Electricity Company (SEC) who said the power would be restored within a couple of hours, but the lights were still out till 8 p.m. Residents complained that no one from SEC had shown up and they were sitting in candlelight.

The torrential rain that drove into Jeddah from the southwest at the break of day, the first day of Haj, caused particularly severe disruption to traffic, as well as overflowing the drainage system. It caused manhole covers to lift and spew black fountains of raw sewage into the streets. Trees were uprooted and fell onto the streets, adding to the hazards. The northbound side of Madinah Road in the Al-Hamra district soon locked solid with traffic while flooding on Al-Malik Road forced vehicles into a single lane.

Within a couple of hours, streets such as the city's fashionable Tahlia Street began to fill with cars with families out to enjoy the spectacle. With them came the irresponsible driving that the challenging conditions always give rise to. Children hung out of car windows to view the confusion while young men in small cars wove through the waters having fun creating their own personal tidal waves for passing vehicles. Some found themselves stranded as the water drowned their engines and brought them to a halt, adding to the chaos and disruption. The conditions should have called for extreme caution and extra distance between vehicles as oil on the roads emulsified into white scum and created a treacherously slippery road surface. This and the combination

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of speed and wet brakes resulted in a number of accidents.

The Civil Defense was unable to provide a precise number of fatalities or injuries due to the deluge; it said it was still in the process of finding out the details.

Meanwhile, shopkeepers and café owners were busy trying to clean up their premises.

One had even gone so far as to lift a manhole cover to drain the water from the road outside his shop and marked the spot with a hastily contrived assembly of scrap.

The flooding was worst in the low-lying areas to the east of the Jeddah-Makkah Expressway, isolating hundreds of people in Quwazah and Abruq Al-Raghama districts. Three helicopters, a number of rubber dinghies and divers participated in the rescue operations conducted by the Civil Defense.

Several marooned people phoned Arab News when teams failed to arrive and rescue them. Immediately Arab News contacted the official spokesman of the Civil Defense and provided him with the telephone numbers and locations of the stranded families.

Director General of Health Affairs in Jeddah Dr. Sami Badawood told Arab News on Wednesday the Health Affairs Department had declared a medical emergency in Jeddah.

“King Abdul Aziz Hospital has been receiving airlifted flood victims,” he said. “While all the government hospitals in Jeddah are kept in battle readiness to deal with flood-related cases, Rabigh Hospital was totally evacuated to accommodate flood victims.”

A bridge on the Makkah-Jeddah Expressway was partially damaged in the flooding. A bus was submerged in the floodwater in an underpass on King Abdullah Road. When asked about the damaged bridge, Ahmad Al-Ghamdi, spokesman of the Jeddah municipality, said he did not have precise information about it because the matter was outside his jurisdiction.

The municipality has sent hundreds of workers and trucks to drain the flooded streets. In all, there were 530 calls to the municipality about the flooding. Muhammad Qattan, commander of flood operations in the municipality, said 12 streets in Al-Matar municipality, 12 in Obhur, 10 in Briman and six in Al-Jamia district were flooded. There are also several flooded streets in Aziziah, New Jeddah and south Jeddah districts, he said.

The director of Civil Defense also sent Wednesday night teams to rescue families stranded in residential complexes in Abruq Al-Raghama district.

The flooding not only brought chaos to Jeddah streets; roads into the city were also blocked. Traffic was held up for several hours on the Makkah Expressway.

Pilgrims heading to Makkah were unable to get there and some even took off on foot while drivers heading the other way had to turn back and find other routes. Some who had set out in the morning for the 45-minute journey to Jeddah from Makkah still had not reached their destination by nightfall.

Despite the downpour, there was limited effect at the city's King

Abdulaziz International Airport. A senior construction engineer working on the new airport project described the scene from his office window as “wet, but working perfectly well.”

“There is no standing water on the taxiways or runways and planes are taking off and landing normally,” he said.

However, sources in the airport traffic control system said that there had been some power outages at the South Terminal and minor problems with the radar. There was never a safety issue, he said, but three incoming flights had been diverted to Madinah.

— *Roger Harrison and Muhammad Humaidan contributed to this report*

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