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Rush to clear Harmain Expressway

Michel Cousins | Arab News

JEDDAH: Operations have been going on round the clock to clear the Harmain Expressway in east Jeddah of hundreds of mangled vehicles destroyed in the Wednesday's devastating flash floods in which at least 106 people drowned. The section of the expressway next to King Abdulaziz University was one of the worst affected areas when the floodwaters swept across from higher grounds to the east. By mid-afternoon Saturday, operators from Saudi Crane Services said that they had removed 700 vehicles from one stretch of the expressway.



PICTURE OF DISASTER: Cranes clear up cars wrecked by flash floods on the Harmain Expressway in Jeddah. (AN photo by Marwan Al-Johani)

The reason for the rush is that Haj officially ends on Monday although many pilgrims start heading home on Sunday. The expressway is the main route between Makkah and Jeddah's King Abdulaziz International Airport and the majority of this year's two million or so pilgrims will be heading toward it.

Despite the clear-up operations, the scene was still one of dreadful devastation. Scores of wrecked vehicles still littered the area. Massive cranes, several stories high — there were seven of them at work, one with a 500-ton lift capacity — were lifting vehicles smashed on top of each other and lowering them to waiting tow-trucks to take them to the scrap yard. Almost all of them were total write-offs. In a bizarre way after a short while, it looked like a construction site — cranes at work moving objects. Except that this had been a place of death for so many just a couple of days before.

"I've never seen anything like this in my life" said one crane operator on Saturday. He had worked around the world moving all sorts of things. Among the bodies pulled out of the mass wreckage, there was one, the previous day, of a small girl, six years of age. Those working were deeply affected.

Mass wreckage is precisely what it was. There was no way that anyone could see it as a collection of individual wrecked vehicles, even if they were being lifted out one by one. There was a cataclysmic collectivity about it — so horrendous as to be almost impossible to believe what one was seeing. The scale of destruction was what happens in Hollywood movies, not in real life, not in front of your eyes. For the crane operators, it was dangerous as well as emotionally difficult. Among the many vehicles that had to be removed was a gas tanker. Metal on metal can make sparks and it could easily have exploded. It had to be covered in foam before it could be moved.

It was difficult not to be impressed by the speed of the clear-up operation in the university stretch of the expressway; 24 hours before it had been a mass of mangled metal. Even so, it provided an awesome indication of the scale of the disaster. If over 700 vehicles were

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removed from that one stretch — and it looked as if there were another hundred remaining — then given the damage seen in other areas of the city, there must have been well over 2,000 vehicles destroyed.

Meanwhile, further west in the city, tens of thousands of tons of water were being pumped out of the King Abdullah Road underpass and the Prince Majed underpass near King Abdulaziz University. Jeddah Municipality announced that it hoped to reopen the former on Sunday. If it is, it will be impressive too. But it would have been so much better if no one had needed to be impressed by the speed of the clear-up operations.

— *With input from Muhammad Humaidan*

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