

The Weekly

PICKING UP AFTER THE STORM

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Providing immediate relief ... NGOs donated blankets and food parcels to residents of Kestel who were left homeless

Government, NGOs and local businesses have stepped in to lend a helping hand to more than 300 households that were left destitute by a tornado two weeks ago

Tomorrow will mark 14 days after a devastating tornado wreaked havoc in Kestel, damaging more than 60 houses and leaving the area without electricity and the residents having to brave the biting cold Free State weather.

Residents of Tlholong Township in Kestel have had to content with staying at a local hall while Eskom employees worked hard to restore electricity. The electricity utility is still working feverishly to restore power in the area. Some residents have resorted to collecting wood to make fire to cook and warm up.

The provincial government together with civic organisations and the private sector, have descended to the area to assess the damage caused by the storm and offer distraught victims immediate help.

The freak tornado swept through the Free State town two weeks ago leaving about 300 families with no food or roofs over their heads in the Tlholong Township and also in Harrismith. The deadly storm also left a trail of destruction in other neighbouring towns such as Bethlehem, Deneysville, Oranjeville and Reitz in the Free State Province.

It was the second tornado to hit the Free State. Last year in October, another storm destroyed houses and left about 100 families homeless. However, government in conjunction with NGOs and businesses have begun offering help to the victims of the storm.

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The Red Cross, Gift of the Givers Foundation and government departments have donated blankets and food parcels to the affected families in Kestel and Welgegund farm in Harrismith where six houses were damaged and four people injured and taken to hospital in Harrismith.

During The Weekly's visit at the Welgegund farm, the six families that were found there were sleeping in the horse stables. July Kgatebe (74) says they had lost everything during the storm. "We had no choice after the tornado destroyed our home but to come and sleep here. However, we want to thank people who still come here and give us food and blankets because we really need them. I lost everything I once had before the tornado and now I do not know how I am going to rebuild a home for my family," said Kgatebe.

Maluti-a-Phofung Local Municipality Executive Mayor, Mofumahadi Mathokoana Mopeli visited both areas and donated blankets and food parcels in Kestel as well 5x5 square metre shacks with the help of local businesses. During the erection of one of the shacks, Mopeli thanked people who made contributions towards assisting the affected families. "Many people come here and donate everything they can because they understand the pain and suffering of the affected people. However, I will also want to thank their neighbours for opening their homes after this disaster, that is humanity," said Mopeli.

Another Tlholong resident, Maria Motloug, said she could not believe her eyes when she had to helplessly watch everything she owned disappear into thin air within minutes. "It was like a dream which one would want to wake up from fast but it was really happening at the time and no one had a chance to look for anything or take cover. I was sitting with four of my grandchildren in the house when we heard a scary sound coming from outside. "By the time we stood up to look at what was happening, we realized that we are already in the open. The only thing left was one wall of the house with no roof. I only want to thank God for ensuring our survival because I still do not understand how we survived from the house when everything was flying around," said Motloug.

The Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) spokesperson, Senne Bogatsu said the extent of the damage and the total number of people affected still had to be established by a joint operations centre in the district. The local hall has been turned into an evacuation centre. Most elderly couples are housed in the centre, and are being offered meals and medical care.



Recovering from trauma ... July Kgatebe was left with nothing after the tornado swept his house away



Making ends meet ... Kestel residents collecting wood to fight cold weather after the tornado destroyed electricity.

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Forty-eight residents of Wonderbron and Glen Ash were evacuated to the Dihlabeng fire station and provided with food. They get transported to their homes in the morning, and back to the shelter in the evening.

Some residents have chosen to stay at their homes and rebuild their houses and salvage whatever they can salvage from the wreckage. They have been provided with 40 blankets, 20 sleeping bags and 20 single foam mattresses by the South African National Defence Force (SANDF).

In Kestel, 250 blankets were donated by the AL-INDAAD Foundation. They will be shared between Kestel and Dihlabeng victims of the tornado. The Gift of the Givers brought 51 food parcels; the Bethlehem Shoprite kitchen provided soup and bread, while Eskom is still repairing the electric poles.

Four people, one woman and three youths have died as a result of the storm. All deceased are from poor families. Government has provided funding to help the families with funeral costs.

The joint operations centre is assessing structural damage, establishing basic needs such as food, blankets, counselling and injuries as well as removing debris.

COGTA and Human Settlement is MEC, Oily Mlamleli has promised that the provincial government will assist the affect families. "There are structures of disaster management that are busy assessing the extent of damage which will inform further action towards immediate and long term assistance of those affected. We appreciate the efforts of NGOs and businesses involved in providing assistance," said Mlamleli.

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