

A nation comes together in time of disaster

Leela Ramdeen, Chair of the Catholic Commission for Social Justice & Attorney-at-Law, Trinidad

In a world in which selfishness, individualism, and greed threaten to overwhelm us, I feel proud of the way in which citizens in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) came together to help each other during the recent widespread flooding in T&T.

As early as Saturday 13th October, the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management (ODPM) was alerting citizens that an Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) was approaching.

T&T is located in the band of the ITCZ. Rains started on 15th October. From 17th –19th October we had 250.2 mm of rainfall. As the ITCZ intensified over T&T the rain fell non-stop, relentlessly. Showers were heavy and torrential at times.

The T&T Meteorological Service upgraded the Riverine Flood Alert level from orange to red. The ODPM urged residents in flood-prone areas “to be cautious and secure their safety and their property and execute emergency evacuation procedures.” The 14 Regional Corporations were put on alert to assist.

The rains continued over the weekend of 20th and 21st October. On 20th October our PM, Dr the Hon. Keith Rowley, declared the floods “a national disaster”. The major rivers e.g. Caroni, Guayamare, Ortoire, Toco, as well as their tributaries, breached their banks, leading to flash flooding on roads, highways, and in many communities; as well as landslips and landslides/land-slippages in some areas. And high tide brought even more disaster.

According to “The Watchers News” as of October 22, floods were affecting an estimated 80% of Trinidad. Affected areas included: Arima, Bamboo, Barataria, Caroni, Cumuto, Cunupia, El Socorro, Diego Martin, Gasparillo, Greenvale Park, La Horquetta, Kelly Village, Las Lomas, Mafeking, Manzanilla, Maraval, Mayaro, Oropune Gardens, Piarco, Port of Spain, St Helena, St Joseph, Sangre Grande, San Raphael, Santa Cruz, and Valsayn. There was also flash flooding in Tobago, in areas such as Bacolet, Delaford, Speyside, and landslide in Castara, Hope, L’anse Fourmi and Mason Hall, where the road had become impassable.

It seems that most people thought that since God is a Trini, we would be spared, and so, both citizens and, to some extent, the authorities were caught with our proverbial pants down - even though we had about a week's warning! Nevertheless, in the main, the nation mobilised to face the onslaught of the floods and it was all hands on deck.

T&T's Fire Service, Defence Force, Coast Guard, and various State agencies were called in to help with the rescue as thousands of citizens were marooned in their homes, cars, and on roof-tops. The ODPM opened a number of shelters at schools, community centres, and civic centres.

A few persons managed to take their pets with them while other pets and livestock were left to fend for themselves. Although, thank God, there were no human lives lost or serious injuries during the floods, there must have been loss of some animals and livestock.

The image of a tethered dog neck high in water as the water rose was disturbing. A 10 ft anaconda was seen in the flood water; a caiman found itself inside someone's house while another was shown on social media trying to get past a gate into someone's yard. Some animals were rescued. The Animal Welfare Network and the Veterinary Association of T&T are providing supplies and emergency care for pets and livestock.

Farmers in affected areas would have lost all their crops. And when we thought that all we had to do now was to wait for the flood to subside, the ODPM chief warned that "It's not over". The Caroni River burst its banks again and the traffic jams continued. There was fresh flash flooding in a number of areas. Flooding in El Socorro South intensified. Many people had been marooned in their homes there for over 3 days and in parts of Mayaro for 5 days. Many schools were closed and commuters were stranded for hours. Some could not get home.

In the midst of this disaster, "Tringagonians" rose to the occasion. Our people came together in a spirit of compassion, generosity and neighbourliness in the service of those in need. Many have lost everything – furniture, car, clothes, school books etc. Even I rolled up my sleeves and cooked pots and pots of food to distribute to those affected by the floods.

Like many others, I delivered bags of clothes as many were forced to leave their homes with just the clothes on their backs. Clothes, toiletries, foodstuff, and cleaning supplies such as bleach and disinfectant continue to pour in to assist those affected. A few doctors offered their services free and, as reported, have been dealing with e.g. scorpion and centipede bites.

A public advisory on 26th October stated that "flood relief and recovery efforts continue in communities affected by the adverse weather which occurred between Thursday 18th October, 2018 to Monday 22nd October, 2018. The National Emergency Operations Centre remains activated and continues to coordinate response, relief distribution, damage assessments and clean-up operations in affected communities."

Health warnings have been issued and the Government has started allocating funds to those affected - although I believe that there is a need to increase the sums that are being made available. The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries are conducting assessments and provide assistance to farmers who were adversely affected by the floods.

On 28th October, Renuka Singh's report in the *T&T Guardian* stated that "The widespread flooding over the past two weeks showed gaps in the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management's (ODPM) ability to deal with a national disaster. The Head of the ODPM, Captain Neville Wint, confirmed...that he will be calling for internal changes to ensure that the unit is better prepared to deal with such national crises in the future. One such change is the legislative implementation of a mandatory evacuation in areas expected to be affected by a natural disaster like hurricanes or flooding... Wint said he was disappointed with the response from his own ODPM, the Defence Force and the Coast Guard after massive floods inundated parts of La Horquetta, Valsayn, and Central last Wednesday..."

“ ‘The Coast Guard couldn't get to the affected areas because they were coming from Chaguaramas and that takes time. They were stuck in gridlock traffic, Wint said.’ Wint said the ODPM was reviewing a plan to make rafts and small flat bottom dinghies available to the regional corporations to expedite the rescue efforts of people stranded or marooned by the rising flood waters. Over the past few days, marooned residents were rescued by citizens in private boats. Many took to social media to ask for help as the State agencies responsible for helping seemed to have collapsed.

“Wint said he was disappointed with the overall response to the flooding and is seeking to have legislation passed to enforce mandatory evacuation in areas that are expected to be hit hard by a natural disaster. There is currently no legislation that the ODPM could levy to force people to leave their homes. ‘In the absence of that we are just reacting and it is instance-based,’ he said. He said a proactive approach would be to have people at the shelters before the situation worsens. ‘But right now we all wait and see and then act,’ he said.

“He said despite the slow pace of the response and his own disappointment in the pace of the ODPM, there was no pre-planning, clearing of water courses or desilting that could have prevented the inundation of water that swamped communities. ‘You have to understand that the watercourses just couldn't handle the amount of water...No amount of sandbagging would have helped. Lessons have been learned, the gaps have been identified at all agencies.’ He said the lessons included improved communications and warning systems to help get the word out to the people before they are impacted by floods.”

Clean-up operations and relief efforts continue. The recovery process will take a while. As well as Charity concerts being organised by various organisations in T&T to support the relief efforts, individuals/groups in the diaspora have also been raising funds - including some in the UK. Caribbean Airlines have offered to transport relief items free of charge. About 20 flights out of Piarco were cancelled.

NGOs, Faith-based organisations such as Living Water Community, St Vincent de Paul Society and others continue to work tirelessly - in solidarity with our brothers and sisters who have been affected.

Offer of funds from other Caribbean islands, such as Dominica and St Lucia, has not been accepted, as our PM believes that we can manage. However, the Government has accepted nearly \$4 million dollars in aid after the floods from the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF).

The Business community and the Joint Chambers in T&T are working on disaster relief also. It warmed our heartstrings to see doubles vendors, those who run breakfast “sheds” etc going into affected areas to distribute free food. One company donated \$1million dollars to the relief efforts.

Roads, including a major highway, were damaged. A contractor paved the affected sections of the highway free of charge. Companies have been offering to provide school books, to repair

'salvageable' items, and to offer counselling services - all free of charge. Former T&T national footballers plan a charity match in aid of flood victims.

The ODPM states that approximately 150,000 persons were affected by the floods – more than 3,500 households. The mental side of flooding trauma will need to be addressed as many citizens would have been affected emotionally and psychologically also.

As the writer, Joan Harrison said: “The functioning of disaster preparedness is more than the assessment of damage, food hampers, shelters, mobilization and general damage control in the field, in terms of environmental salvaging...The mental health of a survivor is of immeasurable importance in the gamut of overall health. Mental health is the precursor to the enjoyment of life and material possessions. Therefore, in disaster planning and response, mental health should be of primary concern to facilitate the psychological well-being of individuals.”

According to clinical psychologist Dr Katija Khan, a university lecturer and current president of the T&T Association of Psychologists, disaster relief should include both physical and mental resources.

In a statement to Loop TT, “Khan outlined several reactions that can be expected both during and in the immediate aftermath of the flooding. They may experience a range of emotional, psychological, cognitive/mental, physical and social reactions. People’s reactions and responses will also vary widely.”

In the face of this disaster, speed is of the essence to help those affected to return to some kind of normalcy and to address trauma that many may experience. While the authorities/agencies played their part in the face of the deluge, there were quite a few heroes/heroines - ordinary people like brothers, Navin and Ravi Kalpoo, who run Ibis Tours - taking visitors by boat through the Caroni Swamp.

They are being hailed as heroes. They, with their co-workers, made 20 trips to rescue more than 400 residents in Kelly Village in one of their boats. These residents had been marooned in their homes and on rooftops in Kelly Village. Their selfless actions continued as they then took food to those affected and are now involved in the clean-up operations.

There were amazing stories such as Jizelle Baldwin’s - a diabetic. See the *Express* newspaper:https://www.trinidadexpress.com/news/local/trapped-for-hours-how-ordinary-citizens-became-heroes/article_a9b1192a-d704-11e8-bd45-e73585fa9d86.html .

Briefly, Jizelle, her husband, Chikara Todd, and 9-year old son, from Las Lomas, together with a man, Mark Kelly, and his 3 young children - aged 1, 3, and 5, whom they had rescued from the floods in their Nissan Frontier, were trapped in their vehicle in the floods for 16 hours - from Saturday 20th October - near Mt Plasir.

Despite talking to agents of the ODPM, the Police, Fire Services, the Regiment, and Coast Guard, none of these agencies came to their rescue. Her plight went viral on social media. At about 6:30 p.m. on Saturday, they managed to drive into a parking lot but the water rose there also and was filling the car.

The next morning after 3 failed attempts by good Samaritans, at around 11:30 a.m., the husband of a woman who had seen Jizelle's appeal on Facebook, arrived with 2 other men in a large pirogue and they were finally rescued and taken to a shelter at Madras Rd., leaving their vehicle behind.

Jizelle said: "We live in a country where we don't think we can trust anyone. But this was an eye opening experience for me. The agencies should have been more prepared to deal with these things. I was pleading for help and it was the citizens of this country that came together to help me and my family, and the other family...I am so proud to be a Trini."

Reggae singer Isasha (Brendan Young), who was also affected by the flooding in Greenvale Park, is seeking to assist his community to recover with the release of his new song, "We Got Love" which was released on Fri 26th October. The lyrics "celebrates the selflessness of everyone banding together to help those in need". Here are a few lines of the song:

"Them say yuh never really know bout pain till it knock pon yuh door, yeah
Just what day inah Trinidad 3 days rain, flooding all bout fuh sure yeah
Me see water start rise up inah Greenvale
Ahfi run left me house and try fih evacuate
Next day people rushing fih help and donate and tell we have faith so

"I know we got more love inah Trinidad than they think
I know we got more unity inah Trinidad than they think..."

As I stated in an article published in the national media and in *Catholic News*, "in the face of disaster, it is heartening to see how our people can come together to help each other. Let's keep the love flowing. However, the aftermath of the recent floods must surely involve a review by all citizens of the need to review not only our disaster preparedness, but also our strategies for building sustainable and resilient cities, towns, villages and communities in general...we urgently need to take stock of what we need to do to ensure that our communities are inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. As the media brought into our homes images of devastation in so many parts of T&T due to the recent floods, I could not help but agree with some of the comments about our apparent lack of ability to plan effectively..."

"Environmental issues must inform planning. As one blogger said, 'imagine HDC built houses in areas that are prone to floods, in former agricultural lands - near wetlands, and the HDC did not build them on stilts!' What environmental impact assessment was done in these areas? Of course, we know that there are many who build private homes in flood prone areas also.

'Time is running out. If we procrastinate, we will face the consequences. We need to use our human ingenuity to plan more effectively for what's coming at us. At the opening of the 71st Special Meeting of the Council for Trade and Economic Development (COTED), (Oct 8 2017)

at which CARICOM's Agriculture Ministers were present, Chairman Soeresh Algoe, Agriculture Minister of Suriname, noted that 'the ferocity and frequency of storms are as a result of warmer air and sea temperatures that are altering the climate... The climate is changing drastically and we, as CARICOM Member States, are most vulnerable.'"

Journalist, Peter O'Connor, reminds us that the last time T&T "was inundated by flooding for several days, with no road connectivity between north and south Trinidad" was "early December 1985. We continue to have floods but not as bad as this recent flood or the one in 1985.

Way back in 2007, Pope Benedict XVI warned: "Our earth speaks to us, and we must listen if we want to survive." Everything is interconnected. And in 1990 Pope St John Paul II said that the environmental/ecological crisis is a moral issue. Read Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si - on care of our common home*.

If we are to become proactive advocates/stewards of God's Creation, we need a conversion of hearts, minds, lifestyles and our "throwaway" culture. As the floods subsided, one could clearly see mountains of plastic and styrotex containers/bottles.

Sadly, many of us know what we must do to mitigate such floods but we need to take the bull by the horn and just do it e.g. address our drainage problems by e.g. dredging/desilting, building retention ponds; deal with unmanaged development and indiscriminate dumping of household items in our waterways; stop the cutting away of soil from our river embankments and strengthen them; enforce planning and environmental laws and so on. We have a duty and a responsibility to care for the earth. Let's hope we will act constructively before the next flood comes along.

At the end of the day, the floods brought out the best in us. Thank God we are a resilient, generous people. The words of Martin Luther King Jr. come to mind: "Life's most persistent and urgent question is: 'What are you doing for others?'" The spirit of volunteerism in T&T is alive and well. God bless our nation.



<http://www.looptt.com/content/list-shelters-opened-response-widespread-flooding>

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