Spanish royals to visit Valencia after deadly floods

AFP- Spain's King Felipe VI and Queen Letizia are due Sunday to visit the Valencia region, Spanish media reported, where devastating floods have killed more than 200 people.

Hopes of finding survivors ebbed five days after torrents of muddy water wrecked towns and infrastructure in Spain's worst such disaster in decades.

Almost all the deaths have been in the Valencia region, where thousands of security and emergency services frantically cleared debris and mud in the search for bodies.

Describing "the worst natural disaster in the recent history of our country," Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said it was the second deadliest flood in Europe this century.

The government had accepted the Valencia region leader's request for 5,000 more troops and informed Sanchez of a further deployment of 5,000 police and civil guards, the premier said.

Spain was carrying out its largest deployment of military and security force personnel in peacetime, he added.

– 'Towns buried by mud' –

Restoring order and distributing aid to destroyed towns and villages – some of which have been cut off from food, water and power since Tuesday's torrent – is a priority.

Authorities have come under fire over the warning systems before the floods, and some stricken residents have complained the response to the disaster is too slow.

"I am aware the response is not enough, there are problems and

severe shortages… towns buried by mud, desperate people searching for their relatives… we have to improve," Sanchez said.

In the ground-zero towns of Alfafar and Sedavi, AFP reporters saw no soldiers while residents shovelled mud from their homes and firefighters pumped water from garages and tunnels.

"Thank you to the people who have come to help us, to all of them, because from the authorities, nothing," a furious Estrella Caceres, 66, told AFP in Sedavi.

Authorities in the Valencia region have restricted access to roads for two days to allow emergency services to carry out search, rescue and logistics operations more effectively.

With telephone and transport networks severely damaged, establishing a precise figure of missing people is difficult.

Sanchez said electricity had been restored to 94 percent of homes affected by power outages and that around half of the cut telephone lines had been repaired.

Some motorways have reopened but local and regional roads resembled a "Swiss cheese", meaning certain places would probably remain inaccessible by land for weeks, Transport Minister Oscar Puente told El Pais daily.

– 'There's nothing left' –

Ordinary citizens carrying food, water and cleaning equipment continued their grassroots initiative to assist the recovery on Saturday.

Around 1,000 set off from the Mediterranean coastal city of Valencia towards nearby towns laid waste by the floods, an AFP journalist saw.

"There's nothing left," Mario Silvestre, a resident in the ruined town of Chiva, told AFP on seeing the damage.

“Politicians promise a lot. Help will come when it comes,” said the octogenarian.

Authorities have urged people to stay at home to avoid congestion on the roads that would hamper the work of emergency services.

Regional leader Carlos Mazon called the floods “the worst moment in our history” on Saturday and laid out a series of proposals to help his region recover, ranging from infrastructure to economic support.

He is due to visit flood-hit areas along with the royals and Sanchez on Sunday, Spanish news agency EFE reported.

The storm that sparked the floods on Tuesday formed as cold air moved over the warm waters of the Mediterranean and is common for this time of year.

But scientists warn climate change driven by human activity is increasing the ferocity, length and frequency of such extreme weather events.

Emergency services late Saturday issued an updated of toll of 213 people confirmed killed – 210 in the Valencia region, two in neighbouring Castilla-La Mancha and one in Andalusia in the south.

Authorities have warned the toll could yet rise, as vehicles trapped in tunnels and underground car parks are cleared.

AFP