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Article Launched: 08/05/2006 12:00:00 AM MDT

Dam on Fort Bliss spills into community

By Tammy Fonce-Olivas and Darren Meritz / El Paso Times

About 600 people were evacuated from Central El Paso, Vinton, Socorro and the Westway area on Friday after the region was hit by a new downpour that caused arroyos and one dam to overflow.

Firefighters and police made dramatic rescues after a Central El Paso neighborhood was surprised by floodwaters, which smashed into homes and placed residents in danger.

No serious injuries were reported.

"People's houses are filling up with water, and there's no way we can stop it. ... We need to pray for sunshine. We are famous for it and we need it back," El Paso Mayor John Cook said Friday.

Emergency workers began evacuating Central residents after heavy rains sent runoff from the Pershing Dam ponding area on Fort Bliss. Residents said nearby homes near Gateway Boulevard North and Pershing Drive were flooded with as much as 3 feet of water.

The floodwaters continued south and flooded homes near the Spaghetti Bowl. In total, about 300 Central residents were evacuated, city officials said.

Alejandro Moy, 15, said he, his mother and two sisters were home Friday afternoon when water began rushing into their house at 4304 Memphis.

"It was scary. We felt electricity running through the water," he said. "My bed is all wet and I could see the walls already dirty and everything and it smells bad. You could see weird stuff in the water."

Moy said he and his family planned to stay at his grandmother's house on the East Side.

Lucy Baca, 86, was evacuated by firefighters with her 56-year-old son, Barry Baca, who is blind, from their home at 4301 Nashville after she called 911 twice, she said.

"I called two times because we needed some kind of emergency assistance," she said. "They came to my house and said I should leave, and I said, 'Sure.' "

El Paso firefighters rescued several motorists whose vehicles stalled in high waters on the northbound frontage road of U.S. 54. One woman trapped waist-deep in water was rescued from her home near the Pershing Dam, Fire Department Battalion Chief Robert Binkley said.

Firefighters and police carried children on their shoulders and in their arms, helped others wade through the waist-deep water and rescued dogs. They also helped people take essential belongings from their homes.

About half a dozen residents fleeing floodwaters sought refuge at a temporary evacuation center firefighters set up at the Roger Bacon Franciscan Seminary at 2400 Marr.

The Fire Department sent seven units to the area. Two water rescue teams helped Fort Bliss firefighters clear a clogged drainage pipe.

"It has been overflowing and there's a drainage (pipe) that takes (the water) across the street and into a man-made arroyo," Fort Bliss Commander Maj. Gen. Robert Lennox said. "We cleared the drain (Thursday), and apparently it clogged up again."

Texas Parks and Wildlife officials were parked at Pershing and U.S. 54 with a boat on standby. Also responding were Customs and Border Protection officials. Sun Metro sent several buses to transport residents to safer locations.

Friday's rainfall also led to the evacuation of about 50 people from the village of Vinton and the Westway area, said West Valley Assistant Fire Chief Russ Beeson.

The evacuees were taken to Canutillo Elementary School at 651 Canutillo.

Though a rush of rainwater flowed through Vinton, the flooding wasn't as strong as it was a few days earlier. "It's been a tough week," Beeson said.

Socorro police helped evacuate more than 150 people from two neighborhoods in Socorro to the Ysleta Del Sur Pueblo Wellness Center. The shelter also accepted families from San Elizario and Clint.

Josh Garcia, emergency management coordinator for the pueblo, said about 200 people, including 30 Clint residents, were expected at the shelter set up at the Ysleta del Sur Recreation Center, 11100 Santos Sanchez St. Garcia said many residents were evacuated because of mudslides.

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"Right now we're making ourselves available for this regional effort," Garcia said.

Dina Gorena, who lives on Reid Road in Socorro, said she never made it home Friday afternoon after picking up her 16-year-old son and 17-year-old daughter

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from Socorro High School.

When she arrived at her street, she found her 18-year-old son waiting for her outside their home. Gorena said Socorro police blocked the street and told them to go to the emergency shelter.

"I don't even have a toothbrush," Gorena said Friday night. "We didn't come with anything."

Gorena said she and her children are anxious about their home's condition.

"I'm a single parent. All our belongings are in that house, along with our beloved dog," Gorena said. "I don't know what's out there just yet."

In El Paso, the city originally set up a temporary shelter at the convention center

Thursday to house South El Paso residents ordered to evacuate their homes because it was feared that the La Frontera Baja dam in Juárez would collapse.

A break in the dam would have sent millions of gallons of water into Downtown El Paso. The mayor lifted the evacuation order for South El Paso on Friday, but many residents fearing the continuing storms stayed at the convention center.

They later returned home and the shelter was closed.

Cook said the relentless rains have caused "a quarter billion dollars in damage" to El Paso County. The city is hoping to receive federal money to rebuild streets, homes and commercial property.

"Every time it rains, the bill keeps going up," he said.

Texas U.S. Sens. Kay Bailey Hutchison and John Cornyn, both Republicans, along with U.S. Rep. Silvestre Reyes, D-Texas, have asked President Bush to expedite the federal major disaster declaration for El Paso County requested Thursday by Gov. Rick Perry.

"El Paso and its citizens have been hit hard in recent days, and it's critical that the federal government provide them with the assistance they need to recover from this serious flooding" Cornyn said in written statement.

The relentless rain is expected to continue this weekend, said Dave Hefner, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service office in Santa Teresa.

"The forecast is for more thunderstorms (today) and Sunday, quite possibly worsening the flooding again," Hefner said.

The chance of rain is 70 percent today and 50 percent on Sunday. Chances of rain will dip to 20 to 30 percent on Monday, Hefner said.

"Hopefully after Sunday, we get a few breaks when everything is isolated," he said.

The official rain measuring site at El Paso International Airport recorded 0.95 inches of rain on Friday.

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Reporters Daniel Borunda and Adriana M. Chavez contributed to this report.

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