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Some Parker County residents allowed to return home

By ANGELA K. BROWN Associated Press Writer
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WEATHERFORD, Texas — Hundreds of storm-weary residents living along the rain-swollen Brazos River finally got some good news Friday when they were allowed to return home, but others had to keep waiting.

The river continued receding and was down to less than a foot above flood stage Friday afternoon, when Parker County officials decided to allow some whose homes had not flooded to return, a day after mandatory evacuations for about 2,000 people.

"I never thought when we bought the house five years ago that we'd be homeless already," Janice Olivares said earlier Friday as she waited with her three children at a shelter set up at a middle school. "That's how I feel right now — homeless."

Meanwhile, President Bush on Friday declared Texas a major disaster area after the storms of June 16-18 and ordered federal aid for Cooke, Coryell, Denton, Grayson, Lampasas and Tarrant counties. Storms have claimed 11 lives since last week in North and Central Texas.

Gov. Rick Perry declared disaster areas in 37 counties across Texas. Residents of those counties will have access to state assistance programs.

The declaration comes after Perry joined local officials in a National Guard Black Hawk helicopter to survey the wreckage above Marble Falls, where much of the heavy floodwaters had receded Friday.

Railroad tracks were ripped from the ground, trees and limbs were scattered, and large trash bins were tipped over.

Authorities were also searching for two 20-year-old men from Leander whose Jeep Cherokee was found submerged in a creek.

The Central Texas town received the brunt of a deluge earlier in the week. About 100 people near Marble Falls were stranded for a third day, as waters blocked all entries and exits, said Burnet County Judge Donna Klaeger. They had power and water, and the Texas Department of Transportation was working on a way to get them out.

They were notified of the evacuation but chose to stay in their homes near Hamilton Creek. Authorities said all were safe.

Perry said temporary pumping at the city's water treatment plant had provided limited water, but residents were still being asked to conserve and boil. The Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation ordered all beauty and nail salons and barber shops using Marble Falls' water system to stop providing services until it is safe.

"We're going to go through some days of frustration; I know we'll all pull together," Perry said. "Floods are like that. ... They take a long time to get over."

At the shelter in Weatherford, about 30 miles west of Fort Worth, Olivares, her children and several others staying there spent the rainy afternoon painting and drawing, thanks to a volunteer from nearby Arlington.

Artist Jan Stumbo said she started "The Soul Art Project," taking her art supplies to disaster scenes and holding impromptu art lessons to help children cope, after Hurricane Katrina. She said she plans to showcase the art created in the shelters in a series of exhibits.

"Art helps kids express their feelings and anxieties," Stumbo said. "When everybody's here in a shelter, they can't play basketball because people may be sleeping, so this gives them something to do."

In the subdivisions near the Brazos River about 20 miles south of Weatherford, the floodwaters ranged from 6 inches to 8 feet deep, authorities said. Parker County Sheriff Larry Fowler said some residents are still not being allowed back into their homes because the low-lying areas are under water. He said he saw a trailer floating in the muddy water, as well as water moccasins.

"It's not safe at all," Fowler said, referring to the heavily flooded area.

The Brazos River was expected to rise and cause more flooding if another flood gate was opened at Possum Kingdom Lake's dam, but officials said that would be done to prevent the dam from breaking only if more heavy rain comes.

Large portions of North Texas remained under a flash flood watch Friday afternoon. The rains had tapered off and become more isolated, but National Weather Service meteorologist Greg Patrick

said storms could cluster and create a more widespread threat of flooding by the weekend.

Along Lake Leon near Eastland, about 90 miles west of Fort Worth, the water has started to recede, and authorities plan to allow residents to return Sunday or Monday, said Lt. Sam Williams of the Eastland Fire Department. Evacuations were ordered for the 150 homes earlier in the week, although 25 people refused to leave the flooded area, he said.

"We're keeping our fingers crossed, but essentially this event is over," he said Friday.

Associated Press writers April Castro in Marble Falls and Grant Slater in Dallas contributed to this report.

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