

# Pleas for help from 'ground zero'

**LIFELINES:** Relief teams in helicopters struggle with heartbreaking decisions in areas cut off by floods

**T**HEIR heads tilted skywards, eyes squinting in the blinding rotorwash being whipped up by the four rotor blades of the SA365N Dauphin 2 hovering above.

Hundreds of villagers at this temporary shelter were praying hard that the pilots of this helicopter, loaded with essential supplies, would set their chopper down. The flood evacuees in Tumpat, more than 2,000 of them, had been forced to call this shelter home for several days now after their homes were inundated by swirling floodwaters.

As soon as the helicopter wheels touched the soggy ground, the flood victims, young and old, dashed to the chopper, ignoring the rotor blades which were still spinning.

Desperation was visible on the victims' faces. Their nights had been wet, dark and cold. The rising floodwaters had made their safe haven all but inaccessible. The only way in was by air. But the inclement weather had forced some rescue and relief missions to be scrubbed or aborted, some when the rescue crews were so tantalisingly close.

A young woman cradling her 6-month-old baby sits away from the crowd intent on getting their hands on the supplies. They're not sure when the next batch will come as they are completely cut off by road. The young mother was forced to stop nursing her baby when she returned to work three months ago. She has enough milk formula for him until tomorrow.

This reporter had to break the bad news to her that the item she was hoping for was not part of the cargo.

The *New Straits Times* was allowed to sit in the jump seat on two humanitarian missions initiated by Tan Sri Syed Azman Syed Ibrahim, Weststar's group managing director. Weststar's assets had been making 10 flights daily all over Kelantan to distribute aid to victims affected by the massive floods.

The company deployed two of its helicopters from its Subang base to help ferry supplies to displaced victims as part of its corporate social responsibility.

Weather permitting, its flight crews will help distribute between 600kg and 800kg of basic supplies during each trip to those stranded in areas with no road access.

As the helicopter makes its third orbit over a school at its next planned stop in Pasir Mas, which, from above, looks like a district made up of a cluster of islands, hundreds more evacuees waved frantically, signalling for the helicopter to land.

"There are hundreds of people there, sir. Let's see if we can go any nearer for an airdrop," the pilot, Captain Abdul Rashid Othman, told Weststar's commercial director Datuk Abdul Aziz Ali, who is leading the humanitarian mission, now into its sixth day. Captain Rashid works the helicopter's collective and cyclic sticks as he eyes a patch of open field below and begins to inch in closer.

Just then, Aziz sees the electrical cables crisscrossing below. The danger of these cables snagging any of the protuberances on the Dauphin is real and could put the entire mission and crew at risk. But Aziz could not dismiss the hopeful and delighted looks on the faces of the young and old lining the school's corridors, waving frantically at them.

"It is too risky Captain, we just can't," he said.

As the Dauphin fades away from the victims' sight, so, too, do the looks of hope on their faces.

Up ahead, a large part of Ketereh seems to be submerged. Another team carrying with it life jackets and basic essentials had earlier taken off, bound for Kuala Krai, already inundated by floodwaters before the copter descended on the town of Gua Musang, where floodwaters had receded. Seventeen areas, however, remained inaccessible.

The Eurocopter AS350 Ecureuil (Squirrel) touched down at a small field in Kuala Krai, another area in the state cut off from the world. Hundreds raced toward the helicopter, its rotor blades still whirring.

A quick-thinking assistant engineer who was part of the crew saw potential danger in the form of a 65-year-old man on a motorcycle racing towards the helicopter. The engineer jumped out of the Ecureuil and ran toward the man, tackling him to the ground.

If he hadn't, the man could have been decapitated by the helicopter's still-spinning rotor blades. His desperate dash for the supplies, it turns out, was out of love for his mother, who, in her late 90s, needed adult diapers.

The diapers, he said, would also make his family more bearable for the other evacuees sharing the same classroom they now call home. It is they who leave the room each

time his immobile mother soils herself.

Like parents with infants, he, too, wore an exasperated, deflated look when the last box was being hauled out of the helicopter. On top of the box was the label "sardines".

Their fate is a little better than the estimated 8,000 Orang Asli Semiar, whom authorities believe have been stranded somewhere inland on Gua Musang without food for the past five days. Roads leading to the area have been

cut off and there is no way for the authorities to communicate with them.

Kamarudin Awang, 45, a father of three, who came back to where his home once stood, squats down, staring at what is left of it. But he is grateful that his family was spared the worst when the first wave of the floods crashed into his home on Dec 16, leaving nothing behind but four pillars.

The image of his wife and two teenage sons being smashed to the wall by the first wave of the waters is still vivid in his mind.

"The floodwaters came so suddenly... I instinctively grabbed my little girl who was next to me and jumped to pull in my sons, who were about to be swept away by the

floodwaters that had pushed down the wall.

"The house was already moving by then, so I grabbed the floating wooden dining table and pushed everyone under it.

"Just five seconds later, the whole house came crashing down," Kamarudin said, adding that he was building up his strength to carry on with his life after the upheaval caused by the disaster — all in the span of five minutes.



**Supplies being distributed from a Weststar helicopter at a relief centre at SMK Temangan in Machang, Kota Baru, yesterday.**