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Rain Hampers Rescue Efforts

Fires, collapses, now slick mud

By Bobby Cuza
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STAFF WRITERS

The skies opened up yesterday on Mike Ryan and other rescue workers struggling to dismantle the fallen World Trade Center to reach the lives lost, or flickering, underneath.

"I don't know how much water is accumulating in the voids," beneath the rubble, said Ryan, helmet stripped from his cropped hair and energy stripped from his voice. "If there is someone alive down there, you don't want too much water."

"Even with the fires that are still going underneath there," he said, "you don't want to put too much water on it, because if there is somebody there, you don't want them to end up drowning."

Rescuers initially thought the rains that fell yesterday, sometimes heavily, from 1 a.m. to mid-afternoon would settle the blanket of ash that pervaded downtown like a terrible snow dusting. But like so many disappointments following the disaster, it kicked up the ash and turned it into a slippery type of mud.

George Mullowney, who with Ryan is a member of Fire Company 68 in the Bronx, said the slush changed the landscape of the challenge before him.

"It's turning from the dust which was bad enough with the masks," he said. "And now we have the mud to deal with. So everyone is slipping around, sliding around." This is now slowing down rescue efforts because of the added caution being taken.

"This weather hasn't helped," said Capt. Patrick Welsh of the Sterling Forest Volunteer Fire Department in upstate Orange County. "You add water to the buckets of cement and it's a lot heavier."



Newsday Photo / Daniel Goodrich

President George W. Bush makes his way through ground zero in Manhattan and greets rescue workers during Friday's visit.

Firefighter Julius Taylor of Truck 7 from Newark felt the temperature drop that came with the storm, and considered another problem. "It cuts the survival time a little bit," he said. "When you've been cold and wet it doesn't help."

The rain was supposed to end last night, and the weekend is predicted to be mostly sunny, according to the National Weather Service.

No matter what was offered by the forces of nature, military and city forces tried to take better control of the stricken area. They expressed gratitude to the volunteers, but said that only donations of heavy equipment such as cranes, torches, cutters and crushers were now needed.

David Mark, a physician from Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, slouched out of the recovery zone yesterday seeing an end to his stint on the on-site medical team. The military is assuming medical responsibility.

"I think the volunteer portion of this is pretty much coming to an end," he said.

He said of the firefighters he had been treating for injuries and fatigue: "If we felt the treatment needed to be extended we had to really supervise they didn't run away from us to get back onto the site . . . You basically have to get three of his buddies to go with him and convince him that's where he has to go."

Even as some rescue workers resisted leaving, others found yesterday that they were restricted from joining in on the rescue work. The city yesterday decided to limit the work to their employees and rescue specialists from other locations.

A volunteer construction worker stopped by a police officer on Canal Street just west of Broadway was disappointed. "This is ridiculous," he said. "I could be in there helping right now. The longer I'm waiting that's more people we could be saving."

Charlie Piraneo of Queens, a New York City asphalt truck driver, did make it through the barriers. His task was to cart off the paper that wafted from the Trade Center blast and was caught by fire escapes that now looked like giant wastebaskets.

In his work, he stumbled across a directory of employees at the Center, its pages ripped like the lives inside the building. His stomach turned. He did not know what do with it.

With work and healing left to be done, he placed it in the back of the truck and carted it away.

Staff writer Hugo Kugiya contributed to this story.

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