

September 25, 2011

Flood Victims Getting Fed Up With Congress

By **ROBERT PEAR**

TUNKHANNOCK, Pa. — Standing in the living room of their house, now full of mud, slime and debris, Helen and Peter Kelly cannot believe that Congress is bickering over disaster aid to people like them.

The roaring waters of the Susquehanna River burst into their home more than two weeks ago. “Water — you work with it every day, and then it destroys your whole life,” Mrs. Kelly said.

Her husband, still looking shell-shocked, said: “We lost everything. Stove, washer, dryer, TV. Hot water heater, clothes, dishes, refrigerator. Everything, just gone.”

The Kellys also lost confidence in government and politicians.

“I wish they would understand that people like us are really in need of assistance,” Mr. Kelly said, pointing to a bathtub filled with mud and to the blades of a ceiling fan twisted out of shape by torrents of floodwater.

A few miles away in Falls Township, Pa., houses were upended, lifted off their foundations and carried a few hundred feet downstream. Huge piles of rubbish, furniture, mattresses, carpets and clothing line the streets.

Michael J. Golembeski and his family spent the weekend cleaning up. Mr. Golembeski offered a sardonic take on the fight that has brought the federal government to the brink of a shutdown, a dispute between Republicans and Democrats in Congress over money for the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#), which provides aid in disasters.

“Neither side wants the other side to get credit for doing anything good,” Mr. Golembeski said. “Elections are coming up.”

With just five days to go before the start of a new fiscal year, the Senate is scheduled to take a test vote on Monday on a stopgap spending bill that includes money for disaster relief. The Senate action seems unlikely to resolve the impasse with the House, where the Republican majority wants to offset some of the cost with cuts elsewhere in the [federal budget](#).

People here in northeastern Pennsylvania, already traumatized by the loss of their homes, were further disheartened by word that FEMA’s disaster relief fund was running short of money.

“Members of Congress are playing with people’s lives, not just their own political careers,” said Martin J. Bonifanti, chief of the Lake Winola volunteer fire company. “While they are rattling on among themselves down there in Washington, people are suffering.”

Mr. Bonifanti said his politics were simple: “If they are in, they should be out.”

Pennsylvanians were just recovering from [Hurricane Irene](#) when they were hit by Tropical Storm Lee. The Susquehanna overflowed, as did tributary creeks and streams dammed up with fallen trees.

The firehouse in Falls Township was filled with five feet of stinking river water, mixed with diesel fuel, sewage and pesticides. Before using it again, firefighters need to decontaminate the site and replace the cinder block walls.

Across the street is a house that exploded on the night of the flood, apparently as a result of a leak in a propane gas line.

“We are basically homeless at this point,” said the owner of the house, Kenneth S. Eisenman, who had been planning to retire after 31 years as a driver for United Parcel Service.

Mr. Eisenman said he was not unsympathetic to the Republicans’ argument that Congress should partly offset the cost of disaster relief by cutting lower-priority programs. Some programs, he said, are as useless and wasteful as providing “treadmills for seahorses.”

Eugene J. Dziak, director of the Wyoming County Emergency Management Agency, in Tunkhannock, said he knew of 61 families that were homeless and needed temporary housing. He also needs help hauling off rubble and cleaning out buildings where mold has formed and could cause health problems.

FEMA provides money to eligible individuals and households to help pay for home repairs, temporary housing, replacement of personal property and other serious needs related to a disaster. In the absence of action by Congress, the agency’s disaster relief fund could be depleted by midweek, federal officials said.

Darlene Swithers, a home health nurse in the Wilkes-Barre area, said that she had received a few thousand dollars from FEMA, but that it would cost far more to repair structural damage done to her home by seven feet of water.

For two weeks, Ms. Swithers had no electric power. She still has no furnace or hot water. When she wants to bathe, she fills her tub with water heated in her microwave oven.

“We are too busy trying to get our lives back together to think much about Congress,” Ms. Swithers said. But she has opinions.

“Members of Congress are intelligent, but they have no common sense,” Ms. Swithers said. “They fight too much. They should be put in a corner and take a timeout and start working together as a team. I’m so sick of hearing Republicans this and Democrats that.”

Ms. Swithers said Congress should set spending priorities, just as she does in paying household bills. The government, she said, would have more money for disaster assistance if it spent less on inessential amenities: “a park where people sit to watch the river and eat lunch; a playground in the middle of an empty field.”

Members of Congress from both parties say they want to speed help to disaster victims and pass a stopgap spending bill to keep the government open after Sept. 30. But first they must make a few points.

On the CNN program “State of the Union” on Sunday, Senator Mark Warner, Democrat of Virginia, said “Tea Party Republicans” in the House were largely responsible for “the spectacle of a near government shutdown.”

Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, the No. 3 Republican in the Senate, said the Senate majority leader, Harry Reid, Democrat of Nevada, had “manufactured a crisis” over disaster aid.

Uprooted and desolate, hard-working people in this part of the country expect a bit more from their government.

“I’m an ex-Navy Seabee,” Mr. Eisenman said. “I paid my dues. I’ve worked since I was 10 years old. I never asked for anything from anybody.

“Now I’ve been sitting here for more than two weeks with nothing,” he said. “I’m very frustrated.”