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Cap Carpenter — Mercury News

Three-year-old Helaina Chinn clings to her father, Clifford, as he sifts through the ashes of their mountain home Thursday

Mountain dwellers weigh whether to flee or dig in

"I want to cry. I just want to go home. I just want to go home."

— Susan Vandraiss,
Redwood Estates resident

By Kathy Holub
Mercury News Staff Writer

Exhausted mountain residents raced to save their belongings from impending rain Friday as new fears arose about sparking power lines, spreading fissures and possible landslides on newly soaked ground.

As demolished or fragile houses swayed precariously over the mountains above Santa Cruz, quake victims tried to marshal their overtaxed decision-making powers. Should they pack up and flee before the rains came? Or should they dig in deeper?

On Rebecca Drive above Boulder Creek, a sense of urgency prevailed. At least two families were so busy packing that they could hardly talk. Paul Ellis, owner of a formerly spectacular glass and redwood home, was one of them.

"We're trying to beat the rain," the Santa Clara firefighter said tersely as his son Aaron tried to wrestle a large bookcase through the door.

Temperatures were dropping, the wind was picking up, the sky was glowering, leaves whipping past. The crushed Ellis home, once valued at close to \$500,000, was so fragile only two people could safely go inside at a time. Once inside, they picked their way among shattered floors and splintered ceilings.

In Boulder Creek, barely two miles from the epicenter of the quake, 72 homes had been destroyed. An additional 12 faced imminent collapse. But down the road, occupants of 100 houses got better news Friday. Geologists advised them that they could safely return just a day after they

were urged to evacuate.

Elsewhere in the mountains, people also wrestled with whether to stay or go. Some couldn't afford to leave, or couldn't bear to. So they slept in evacuation shelters or in their own driveways. Most of them had only summer tents. And cold weather was coming.

Residents said people had been getting noticeably more tense and depressed as the lack of heat, electricity and water continued.

"Everyone seems to be a little more touchy today, a little on edge," said Rick Swayne, who like many homeless was sleeping outside the Redwood Estates Pavilion evacuation center with his wife, Jan, and their 4-year-old daughter.

Bruce Vandraiss seemed in shock. His house in Redwood Estates had slipped down a 100-foot ravine. Now it was nothing more than a sad pile of rubble, already condemned by building inspectors.

The exhausted Vandraiss spoke slowly as he sifted through the rubble looking for his wedding ring, which he'd left on the mantle over the living room fireplace. He said he would find the ring if he had to put every fragment of the house through a sifter. But so far, he hadn't been able to find a single piece of furniture that had once been in the living room, including the stereo.

"I'm philosophical outside," he said, "but inside I'm boiling."

"I want to cry," said his wife, Susan. "I just want to go home. I just want to go home."

As officials tried to predict what more could go wrong, rain was perhaps the greatest worry.

"If we get a rain now, and it depends on how much, all of these fissures are going to start collecting water," said Boulder Creek Fire Chief Bud Tomlin. The water might then create mud and cause weak ground to slip, he said.

It was, for some, the last straw. The damage in the mountains had already been enormous. In Zayante, an area of Felton, 30 homes had collapsed, 200 were uninhabitable and 2,000 had significant structural damage. In Ben Lomond, at least 15 houses had been destroyed. And in Redwood Estates, seven houses had been declared uninhabitable, 37 had slipped off their foundations and 390 others were damaged.

Red ribbons, the official signal of condemnation, flew from many houses. Fissures crisscrossed the area, with new ones appearing all the time.

As electrical power was restored to the area, live wires sparked fires throughout Santa Cruz County. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) had fought about 100 wild-land fires in the county since Tuesday night. The smallest were spot fires, the largest a 17-acre blaze in Nisene Marks State Park north of Aptos.

The CDF had also fought about 25 house fires. Most had been losing battles. "Many (homes) were already totally involved when we got there," CDF spokesman O.J. Burrell said.

Officials feared new fires.

"All the chimneys are wrecked, people are going to be turning on their heaters and wood stoves. . . (there might be) electrical wires in the walls that have been separated from a receptacle," said a worried Jack Munsey, assistant fire chief in Ben Lomond.

In Zayante, fire Commissioner Barbara Macallair had been glued to the phone for three days taking emergency calls.

"We have houses out there being held up by two-by-fours," she said.

Her phone log contained such hair-raising jottings as: "10389 Vera, danger of falling; 10379 Vera, house held up by trees; 11505 Lake Boulevard, propane tank held up by ropes; Middle Ellen Road, can't find house."

On Upper Ellen Road, Stephen and Leslie Holmes regarded their spectacular view of Monterey Bay with a new apathy. They'd just built the home, moving in five months ago. When the quake hit, they'd been at Candlestick Park. Their 15-year-old son, Charlie, had been walking home from Los Gatos High School. They hadn't been able to find their son for 24 hours because he had hitchhiked out of the canyon. Leslie Holmes said they would leave without rebuilding. "Just the memories of this place. . . I don't know, I'd freak out at the slightest little shake."

She called their home "the shattered dream." The house had been sheared in half.

Mercury News Staff Writers Brad Kava, Marilyn Lewis, Robin Musitelli and Lorenzo P. Romero contributed to this report.