

Over 170 die in floods in southern Russia

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At least 170 people have died following flooding in the southern Russian region of Krasnodarsk at the weekend. Tens of thousands of homes were flooded and hundreds of people injured.

According to official figures, more than 12,000 people have been affected by the disaster and the death toll is expected to rise. Various estimates put the toll of potential victims at between 500 and 1,000. Further heavy rains are predicted for the coming days.

The hardest hit area was the tourist region of Krymsk on the Black Sea, with a population of almost 50,000. There were additional deaths in the towns of Gelendzhik and Novosibirski. Most victims were elderly people in Krymsk who were overcome by the waves in their sleep and could not escape from their homes in time. Several children were killed in the disaster.

About 30,000 households remain without power and around 3,000 people have been evacuated from the area. In Krymsk there is no gas and there are difficulties with the water supply in the cities of Nishnebakanski and Neberdshaevski.

A television reporter at the disaster site said: "It was very scary, just terrible: the water spread very quickly and swept everything up in its path. Windows and furniture from the houses, everything in the yards was caught up and carried away by water."

Residents of Krymsk reported that the town's roads were covered with corpses.

Many survivors of the disaster have lost everything. Insurance on houses and cars is a rarity in Russia. The Kremlin has promised to pay 160,000 roubles (4,500 euros) as compensation per person, but this sum is entirely inadequate to cover the losses of victims.

The storm also appears to have wrought huge economic damage in the agriculturally-oriented area.

Reports refer to drowned cattle and large-scale destruction of crops. Initial estimates put the material damage at one billion roubles (about 25 million euros).

The rainfall at the weekend was the most powerful recorded in the region for the past 70 years, but reports by victims in Krymsk suggest that the floods were not merely due to natural causes.

On Saturday, a number of Internet forums reported that the nearby water reservoir in Neberdshaevski had been overfilled by rain and the local administration responded by opening the floodgates without warning the population. According to various eyewitness accounts, the water level in Krymsk rose by 2 meters to a total of 7 meters within 15 minutes.

In an initial statement the press spokeswoman for the governor of the Krasnodarsk region, Alexander Tkachev, declared the reports "absolute nonsense". However, official sources have confirmed that large amounts of water had been released due to a malfunction of the reservoir.

It is very likely that this malfunction contributed significantly to the scale of the disaster. The water reservoir was built in 1963 and is in extremely poor condition. Nevertheless, the local administration has refused to check to what extent the opening of the reservoir was responsible for the flooding in Krymsk.

There was a similar case in 2002 when authorities in the southern Russian district of Stavropolski opened up two water tanks due to defects. The subsequent floods killed 30 people. No measures to modernize the storage tanks have been taken.

The infrastructure in Russia dates mostly from the Soviet era and has decayed since the restoration of capitalism after 1991. The death toll from natural disasters such as floods and the forest fires that raged two years ago has multiplied as a result.

However, it is not only the disastrous state of the

infrastructure that is to blame. The failure of government institutions is also responsible for the high number of fatalities and injuries. The population was not warned in time and state assistance came far too late.

The mayor of Krymsk said on camera to President Vladimir Putin that he was first warned of a disaster at 10 p.m. and an official televised warning to the public was not made until 11:30 p.m. By 11 p.m. the electricity had been shut off, so nobody was able to take heed of the warning anyway. No other attempts were made to warn the population.

Many people were sleeping when they were surprised by the flood, and they then had to wait hours for help. Maria Zubaliyi, a resident of Krymsk, told the newspaper *Gazeta.ru*: “We were woken at 4 a.m. when our neighbours from the first floor, which was completely flooded, knocked to ask if they could stay the night with us... Towards 7 a.m. the water level slowly began to sink. Planes from the ministry for emergency situations first began to fly at 8. There were neither boats nor airplanes the whole night long. People had to save themselves. Now there is no television or radio, no one is telling us anything. We are sitting here without food or drink.”

While hundreds of residents had to wait for hours for medical care and assistance in evacuating, wealthy citizens could count on more support. A Youtube user has posted two videos on the Internet. One shows people waiting on their roofs for help and rowing boats through the flooded city. The second shows a wealthy resident being plucked from the roof of his multi-story villa by helicopter.

The reaction of the local authorities and the government in Moscow testifies to the contempt felt by the ruling elite for the working population. This has been understood by broad masses of people. The Russian Internet is full of indignant comments blaming the decrepit infrastructure and the government for the high number of casualties.

Criminal proceedings have been initiated against unknown persons for involuntary manslaughter. Such proceedings are regularly undertaken in the wake of disasters and inevitably lead nowhere. There has never been a case of a responsible government official being held to account.

The response of President Putin, who travelled to the

scene of the disaster, was to call for more police to prevent looting. There had, in fact, been only two or three reports of looting.

The Kremlin’s real fear is that after the flood waters ebb the population will express its anger against the government for its role in the disaster. This is why security forces are being sent to the region.



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