

## **Floods Devastate Western Georgia**

**Author:** [Irakly Lagvilava](#)

Many provinces may be face with millions of dollars worth of flood damage following a week of torrential rain.

Georgia's already impoverished western regions have suffered new misery over the past month after torrential rain caused widespread devastation.

In some areas, the flooding was compounded by the controversial decision to release water from the Inguri hydroelectric power station to relieve pressure on its ageing dam.

Some local people are now protesting that the government has failed to help them properly. One man in Georgia's second city Kutaisi has gone on hunger strike in an attempt to persuade the authorities to help rebuild his collapsed home.

The floods, which peaked at the end of April, hit the whole of the west and northwest of Georgia. David Saganelidze, parliamentary deputy who represents the mountainous Racha region, said on May 4 that his district had been devastated.

He described the village of Oni as being "like Venice", with all its streets under water, and noted that the area had a severe lack of drinking water.

Saganelidze has also accused the authorities of inaction. "Evidently the government is not hoping for success in this region and doesn't find it necessary to invest any funds here," he said.

The disaster occurred when several major rivers in western Georgia overflowed following heavy rains and snow melting in the mountains. By late April, around 40 bridges and up to a hundred private homes had been completely destroyed, and more than 250 families had been evacuated. The economic damage is believed to be far greater, with villages, fields and roads flooded and communications links disrupted.

Joni Purtskhvanidze, a rock quarry owner in the village of Vartsikhe, told IWPR that he now has to row his fishing dinghy to work every morning after the Rioni river flooded his land.

"The flood washed away my orchard, garden and vineyard," said Purtskhvanidze. "My yard, ground floor and basement are filled with water, and the river took my poultry and my cattle. But at least we saved our children, who almost drowned in their sleep."

Georgian officials reject the charge that they have been inactive and say they have launched a major recovery programme for the region.

Visiting the affected areas, Georgian prime minister Zurab Nogaideli promised that an extra 20 million lari - around 11 million US dollars - would be provided for disaster relief. "The president has instructed the government to petition parliament to amend this year's national budget," he said.

Nogaideli and presidential chief of staff Gigi Ugulava inspected flood-damaged villages throughout Imereti region, wading through the water in high rubber boots.

“It’s tough. Dozens of villages have been cut off. But we will act after the extent of damage is assessed. Cheer up - everything will be alright,” Nogaideli told a village gathering, but few faces lit up.

In the coastal Zugdidi district, the floods were made worse by repairs at the local hydroelectric power plant on the Inguri river.

Repair work at the Inguri hydroelectric power plant required the water level to be reduced at the Inguri dam, and the surplus water was funnelled into the river. This caused it to rise and flood neighbouring villages.

Locals are angry at the authorities for flushing more water into a river that was already running high. But Nikoloz Maisuradze, the chief engineer in charge of the repair work, said there was no other solution.

“Unless we complete emergency work this year, the locals will face a far bigger threat in the future,” he said. “This dam has not been repaired in 27 years.”

Avtandil Kvachakidze, director of the Kolkheti meteorological station in western Georgia, said that rain alone was not to blame for the disaster, and said that logging had left the region more vulnerable to flooding.

“The rains were not to blame for the high water in western Georgia,” he said. “The problem is we have fewer forests to fend off water during the rain season, and this year the soil was too saturated with moisture.”

The rivers are now retreating but now weather forecasters are warning of imminent floods in eastern Georgia, and Kvachakidze predicts that heavy rains in May could cause a new natural disaster there.

Irakly Lagvilava and Nino Gerzmava are correspondents for IWPR’s Panorama newspaper, where an earlier version of this article appeared. See [http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?local\\_caucasus/caucasus\\_panorama.html](http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?local_caucasus/caucasus_panorama.html)

**Location:** [Caucasus](#)  
[Stavropol](#)  
[South Ossetia](#)  
[North Ossetia](#)

**Focus:** [Caucasus](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/floods-devastate-western-georgia>