

Georgia: Quake Victims Protest

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Eight months after last April's earthquake in Tbilisi, thousands of residents say they are facing a winter without proper housing.

As snow was falling in Tbilisi on Sunday December 15, hundreds of residents calling themselves the "victims of the April earthquake" took to the streets demanding long-delayed help from the government.

"Only six people died in Tbilisi in collapsing buildings on April 25," said Lia Mikeltadze, one of the protesters outside the government offices in centre of the capital. "But since then thousands risk death every day by staying in their dilapidated, unsafe homes or else they have to make do with appalling miserable housing given them by the government."

The earthquake that struck Tbilisi on the evening of April 25 measured six on the Richter scale, and was the worst tremor Georgia had experienced in 40 years.

Six people died and about 50 were injured, 2,319 buildings were fully or partially destroyed and 13,099 more suffered major damage.

Three days after the earthquake, Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze addressed the nation, saying the government was taking all the necessary steps to deal with the aftermath of the disaster. He also called for international help.

The earthquake relief campaign raised about three million US dollars from domestic and international donors. The bulk of the amount, 2.5 million euros, came from the German government.

However, the total cost of the damage was estimated at 180 million dollars.

The gaping difference between those two amounts left no hope for those who lost everything in those fateful three minutes.

Lia Mikeltadze lives with her two children in Nadzaladevi, the old district of the Georgian capital hit the hardest by the earthquake. There is now a gap a few centimetres wide between one of the walls of her house and the ceiling. "The crack gets bigger every time it rains," she said. "The house is tilting. It could collapse any time."

All through the summer and early autumn, Lia and her children lived in a tent in the yard outside the house. She was offered no other accommodation, so when the weather got colder, the family had no choice but to move back into their unsafe home.

The government said it simply does not have the resources to re-house everyone. "The money donated by the German government paid for the reconstruction of some municipal buildings and helped build temporary shelters for earthquake victims," Zurab Gudavadze, head of the Earthquake Relief Fund in the Tbilisi mayor's office, told IWPR. The rest of the money was spent on acquiring 256 apartments for people who were completely homeless.

Three hundred and eighty six more families, whose houses were found to be unfit for habitation, were offered accommodation in improvised hostels.

Eighty-two of these families have found shelter in tiny rooms in Tbilisi's Economics College. There is only one bathroom and one kitchen for every 14 families. The building has no natural gas, so the only source of heating is electricity, which is available just a few hours a day.

Nana Ordenidze said her house was completely destroyed in the earthquake, she is sick and her husband is disabled. "We have nothing to look forward to," she said. "The only thing we are praying for now is some electricity on New Year's Eve."

"These people are so desperate they won't even listen to us," said Gudavadze. "They demand money from us as if we are a government agency when in fact we are only spending what money comes through to us. The strain is so great that my predecessor, Nodar Amashukeli, had a heart attack right in his office."

Gudavadze said his fund has been promised another 1.5 million lari (about 700,000 dollars) before the year's end, some of which will come from the president's "emergency account".

"If we ever get that government money, we will split it in half," Gudavadze promised, with some of the money going to buy apartments for those who had lost everything and the rest in small one-thousand-dollar grants to help people patch up their homes and get through the winter.

The Earthquake Relief Fund works in partnership with 16 non-governmental organisations, who jointly review and approve all lists of victims. "That was our own initiative to ward off suspicions of embezzlement," said Gudavadze.

But the earthquake victims are demanding more. Georgy, his wife and their two small children, have been living at the Economics College for the past six months. They sleep, cook and do their laundry in the same room. The children wear their clothes to bed because it is so cold. "We could rebuild our house ourselves with the help of our friends and neighbours," Georgy said. "All we ask for is a little government help."

On December 16, parliamentary deputy Georgy Baramidze proposed in parliament granting tax breaks to earthquake victims, who want to rebuild their homes on their own and to developers who would agree to provide new housing to earthquake victims. Assembly members responded positively, but discussion of the idea was postponed till next year.

"The problem is we need to act quickly, as the disaster is growing in scale, and may soon reach national proportions," said Gigi Batiashvili, chairman of the Tbilisi "Curatorium", an association of respected city residents, which is currently supervising the relief fund.

"First the rains in September rainfall and now the snowfall in December have weakened foundations and widened the cracks in the roofs and walls of damaged buildings," Batiashvili told IWPR. "Many of the houses that government inspectors thought could be rebuilt in the spring and summer are now too far gone and will have to be torn down."

Luisa Okroshidze, a doctor temporarily residing at the Institute of Neurology, believes the real human tragedy in the wake of last April's earthquake far surpasses the official figures.

"How many people have died who were unable to handle the loss and destitution after the April disaster?" she said. "No official statistics have been kept of those deaths. There have been dozens. My father never got over the shock and died, and now my husband is in bed with angina pectoris. The tragedy is still taking its toll."

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