

Rescue Workers Fear Mudslide Death Toll Could Rise

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Seven are killed and eight injured when a massive mudslide destroys apartment blocks in Kabardino-Balkaria

More than 3,000 people have been evacuated from Tyrnyauz, in Kabardino-Balkaria, after the town was swamped by three successive mudslides which claimed at least seven lives.

Helicopters worked round the clock to evacuate stranded residents who had climbed on to their roofs to escape the river of mud. Emergency workers searching the flooded areas say seven bodies have already been recovered but the true death toll could be much higher.

Disaster struck at 10.30am on Wednesday, when the first mudslide surged through the mountain settlement, 30 miles west of the capital, Nalchik.

The slide was triggered by a night of torrential rain but, despite forecasts from the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the local authorities failed to warn the population of 27,000 until it was too late.

Within half an hour of hitting Tyrnyauz, the mud had flooded the lower two floors of apartment blocks along Otarov and Zavodskaya Streets. Residents were forced to abandon their possessions and scramble on to roofs as the powerful torrent reached depths of over two metres.

At 1pm that afternoon, a second mudslide crashed down from the mountains, destroying a five-storey building on Zavodskaya. At least seven people were killed and another eight seriously injured.

The flood also swept away a bridge across the Baksan River, effectively cutting the town in half. By Wednesday evening, 3,000 residents were waiting to be evacuated by the emergency services, most without access to electricity or clean water.

Over 270 rescue workers were dispatched to the scene, supported by nearly 50 helicopters and emergency vehicles. However, the 450 people rescued that evening had little cause for relief - inadequate facilities meant that most had to spend the night without food or shelter.

On Thursday, Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov sent Yuri Vorobyev, the deputy minister for emergency situations, to the region in a bid to oversee the evacuation.

However, on Friday afternoon, the town was hit by a third slide which swept away temporary bridges over the river and cut off any communications with the rescue teams.

A spokesman for the Ministry of Emergency Situations said early forecasts had warned of possible mudslides in the Tyrnyauz region but local authorities had made little effort to prepare for such eventualities. "People were calmly going to work on the morning of the disaster," he said.

The spokesman went on to say that the torrential rains had caused two mountain lakes to overflow,

displacing over 30 million cubic meters of muddy water which crashed into the Garkho-Zhansu River.

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