

Snowed Under in Tajikistan

Author: [IWPR Central Asia](#)

Government faces criticism for waiting for natural disasters to happen rather than taking preventive measures.

Heavy snowfalls in early February that left 14 dead from avalanches, freezing temperatures and dangerous roads appear to have caught the Tajik authorities unprepared.

The snow is the worst seen for three decades, and with several hundred avalanches recorded in the last two weeks.

Officials say the cash-strapped government budget means they just don't have the resources to cope.

But their response - focusing on rescue rather than prevention, and relying heavily on international assistance - has come in for criticism in a country where the mountainous terrain means avalanches and landslips are a regular occurrence.

Nine people died and three were injured between February 1 and 4 in Dedonak, in the Nurabad district 180 kilometres east of the Tajik capital Dushanbe.

On February 6, a 17-year-old in the Tavildara district of eastern Tajikistan was killed by an avalanche, and two children aged six and seven froze to death when one trapped them inside their home.

The same day, a police truck on its way to deliver humanitarian aid to people trapped by snow at Rogun, 80 km east of the capital, drove off a cliff in thick fog, killing two and injuring three.

There is also significant damage to property and infrastructure, with at least 40 homes destroyed in the Rasht valley

Some 200 vehicles were trapped for two days as multiple avalanches blocked the highway that runs up the valley, through some of the highest mountain ranges in the world.

Further south, the Muminabad district of Hatlon region was hard hit, with three schools among the buildings destroyed, and homes were also damaged in the Darvaz district on the border with Afghanistan.

The ministry for emergencies reports that traffic is back to normal on all roads apart from the highway which runs at high altitudes from Khorog on the Afghan border north to Osh in Kyrgyzstan.

The minister for emergencies, Mirzo Ziyoev, gave a press conference on February 7 where he said, "Tajikistan and our ministry have never before faced problems on such a scale. It is too early to assess the scale of damage, but we are expecting enormous economic loss."

Official figures suggest the snowfalls and avalanches have cost the country at least 650,000 US dollars.

Ziyoev said more than 2,800 people in Nurabad district had been evacuated to temporary accommodation in schools, hospitals and mosques.

United Nations agencies and international non-government organisations working in Tajikistan provided immediate assistance worth 150,000 dollars to people in the worst-hit areas. The supplies included two tonnes of medicines and eight tonnes of food, as well as tents and blankets.

The government is facing strong criticism for its failure to anticipate the natural disaster.

Tajikistan frequently experiences avalanches in winter and floods, mudslides and drought at other times of the year, but each time the authorities appear to be caught napping.

“It is clear that the high level of damage that occurs in natural calamities in our country is primarily a result of low levels of preparedness, poor staff training, and lack of equipment on the part of the emergency services,” Ravshan Shoazimov, an independent political analyst, told IWPR. “Our emergency services have no planes or helicopters with which to respond to new emergencies promptly, and they have no special instruments or equipment.”

The rescue services have been given uniforms, telecommunications systems and other equipment as part of technical assistance programmes from the United States, Russia, Japan, and other countries.

But according to Shoazimov “most rescue workers are unfamiliar with the most basic rescue techniques. They cannot rescue anyone as they themselves need to be rescued”.

The official line seems to be that natural calamities are inevitable, so resources should be focused on post-emergency rescue rather than prevention.

“All of Tajikistan is a high-risk area,” said Kozidavlat Koimdododov, a former deputy prime minister in charge of emergencies. “Thirty per cent of our communities are entirely at the mercy of the elements. We don’t have a [comprehensive] early warning system, and we couldn’t possibly have one.”

Koimdodov said more countries in Europe and Asia proved equally helpless in the face of the elements. “Tajikistan is lagging far behind in industrial development, so we cannot be blamed,” he said. “Even the most powerful states with strong economies are helpless when the elements hit.

“It is wrong to say that one country may be more capable of tackling a natural calamity than others. All we can do is create the primary framework for rescue operations, but we cannot avert what’s coming.”

Koimdodov noted that even in the Soviet period, Tajikistan only had one early warning system, which still monitors Lake Sarez, in the high-altitude region of Badakhshan. The lake has been described as time-bomb, or “the sleeping dragon”, because if it broke out of its natural dam it would swell the Amu Darya river and flood large flatland areas of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan as well as Tajikistan.

In July last year, Tajikistan was hit by a series of mudslides that caused more than 12 million dollars’ damage to the country’s already struggling economy. At the time, the prime minister, Aqil Aqilov, appealed to the international community for help, saying, “Due to severe budget constraints, the government is

unable to deal with the damage on its own.”

After the recent snow, international donors may once again have to provide where the government cannot.

Meanwhile, there is a high risk of more avalanches, as the sun is shining and the air is not too cold. Tariq Kadir, country director for the British aid organisation MERLIN, said the best time to move around in mountain areas is early in the morning and late at night, when the freezing air reduces the avalanche threat.

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