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Tbilisi Zoo Announces Post-Flood Comeback

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Tbilisi zoo keepers drag a dead lion.

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Two months after horror-movie scenes of zoo animals wandering around Tbilisi made international headlines, the Georgian capital's zoo has announced plans to reopen in September.

The zoo will return to a section of its old territory that managed to escape destruction when a flash flood hit on June 13-14 and killed most of the facility's animals. In the words of zoo director Zurab Gurielidze to PalitraTV, "We still have some interesting animals left."

The zoo's population still includes lemurs, deers, peacocks and Begi the hippo, who famously sauntered past a nearby Swatch store after the flood wiped out his enclosure. Begi now urgently needs a new home.

"In winter, this animal must have an indoor pool filled with warm water," Gurielidze said in an earlier interview with Liberali Magazine. No other Georgian zoo can accommodate Begi and the only way out is to build a new pool. The same goes for the crocodiles, which are now crashing at the penguins' place.

Work has been under way to clear out the mud and debris, but the zoo is still largely a gloomy scene of ruined cages and destroyed carousels. Fortunately, though, an exceptionally hot summer has enfeebled the neighboring Vera creek, which, swollen by torrential rain, ravaged the zoo and its area on the nightmarish night of June 13-14, killing 19 humans and scores of animals.

The zoo administration said that eventually it will move the animals from their downtown location to the outskirts of the city, by a large reservoir locally called the Tbilisi Sea.

"It is going to be spread out on about 43 hectares, which will allow us to make a much larger enclosure, where animals will be in an almost free-range condition," zoo deputy director Davit Taktakishvili told Interpressnews. "I am primarily speaking about the ungulates, of course," he added. "There will be particular safety measures taken for the predators."

Construction of a new zoo will take about two or three years, he said. As yet, no official cost estimates have been released.

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