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As Russia's Regions Battle Floods, Local Officials Hide Real Damage and Pray to God

By Leyla Latypova

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@megatyumen

When forecasts predicted that the waters of Siberia's Ishim River would soon flood the city that shares its name, Russian Orthodox priests held a prayer service in the skies over the city to protect it.

"We carried out a flight with the icons of the Kazan Mother of God, Saint Prophet Elijah and Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker. We read a prayer against flooding," Bishop Tikhon of Ishim told the Ura.ru news outlet on Monday.

"In the past, in times of hardship, the whole world would come together to pray, but this time, only two people performed the service. Of course, we will [keep] praying to God. We hope that the Lord will have mercy on us and that there will be no flooding," said Bishop

Tikhon.

The Tyumen region city of Ishim is projected to be hit by annual floods in mid-April. Still, local authorities have already advised residents to relocate their belongings from allotment gardens, which are expected to be submerged by the overflowing river.

Though the authorities are attempting to protect the city by erecting temporary earthen embankments along the river, neither they nor their constituents seem to hold any illusions that the efforts will prevent destruction.

"A very high water level is expected in the Ishim River, so we cannot afford to relax!" said Mayor Fyodor Shishkin.

Weather and climate-related natural disasters have become increasingly widespread and severe across the country in recent years, including highly destructive seasonal floods and wildfires.

This year, 12 Russian regions have already experienced flooding caused by unusually warm weather, according to local media reports. This number is likely to increase as temperatures rise.

Though many of the now-flooded areas have been affected by rising water in the past, regional officials in Russia appear ill-prepared to manage such disasters. To quell the inevitable public discontent with the poor disaster response, most officials choose to deflate the extent of the damage or shift the blame on Moscow.

This week, Russia's emergencies ministry acknowledged that 15 people died in last spring's catastrophic flooding in the Kazakhstan-bordering Orenburg region.

The ministry also confirmed that 311,500 people were impacted by the disaster, with 17,800 rescued from evacuated areas.

Russian officials previously insisted that the floods, which affected 286 towns and villages, did not cause any fatalities, despite at least seven deaths confirmed by independent journalists.

This week's confirmation of deaths was permanently deleted from the emergencies ministry's website shortly after its contents were widely reported by Russian independent media.

As Orenburg — where rising waters have already forced the closure of multiple roads across the region — braces for new floods, residents of Orsk, the city hardest hit by last year's historic floods, warn that the local dam is not yet ready to handle a new flooding season.

Related article: 'Devastating to See': Russia's Orenburg Region Battles Historic Flood

In the neighboring Sverdlovsk region, where this year's widespread floods will be followed by another catastrophic wildfire season, officials banned the press from attending public disaster-preparedness hearings at the local Civic Chamber.

Last year, Sverdlovsk firefighters went on strike at the height of the wildfire season to protest low salaries and poor working conditions, with many complaining of a lack of equipment and proper protective clothing.

Further east in the Irkutsk region in Siberia, hundreds of homeowners have been affected by floods so far this year.

The small Irkutsk region village of Khomutovo was submerged in water within an hour last weekend, according to local residents.

Khomutovo head Alexander Ivanenko blamed the event on federal authorities in Moscow, noting that the village and the district it belongs to don't have the financial means to equip it with a proper water drainage system.

Meanwhile, Irkutsk Governor Igor Kobzev continues to assure the public that the situation in the region remains "stable."

This was echoed by officials in other affected regions, including Chelyabinsk, where 70 residents were evacuated from the city of Asha due to floods last week.

"When the water came, you were claiming there were errors [with the local dam's operations], but now you claim that everything is 'stable.' Well, that was fast," VKontakte user Dyadya Dobry wrote in response to a Monday announcement that hydraulic structures around Asha were "functioning as normal."

"Looks like you lined your pockets with money, and then everything became stable. Until next spring," the user added.

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