

Natural disaster strikes Racha, broken highway, bridges collapsed



► Overflowing River in the Municipality of Oni

By KHATIA BZHALAVA

Due to heavy rain in Oni Municipality, the overflowing of the river Rioni significantly damaged the highway and left hundreds of residents locked in the village without electricity. As Archil Japaridze, the governor of the municipality stated, damage caused by the disaster is severe.

The central highway is broken in 8 areas and 10 of the bridges have collapsed.

Restoration of bypass roads has started, however, the governor is unable to specify how long it will take for the works to be completed.

According to the official information published by the government, rescuers of rapid response to special accidents of Tbilisi are involved in the operation. Border police helicopter of the Ministry of Internal Affairs has been used to transport 30 residents from the disaster zone, including 3 minors. Some of them

are locals and they happened to be visiting the site as tourists.

The government also stated that the dwellers receive water in a malfunctioning way, and until the damaged facility of water supply is repaired, 400 customers will be provided with water by cisterns. Also, if necessary, the residents will be provided with medicines and food supplies on the site.

Under the instructions of the Prime Minister, Giorgi Gakharia, emergency

headquarters have been created in order to assure timely and coordinated liquidation of the outcomes caused by the natural disaster. Emergency headquarters includes the representatives of the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia, Roads Department of Georgia, United Water Supply Company Energo-Pro Georgia, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, Emergency Management Service and the representatives of local government.



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POLITICS

ISFED presents a report on salary monitoring of Election Administration of Georgia



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ISFED presents a report on salary monitoring of Election Administration of Georgia

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

On July 28th, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) published a monitoring report of expenses incurred for salaries of Central Election Commission's (CEC) members and employees in 2016-2019 years. As the statement released by ISFED reads, the document researched compensation (salary, bonuses, supplements) of CEC members and supervisors as well as the members, staff and freelancers of the District Election Commission.

According to ISFED, the report aims to analyze what positive changes have been implemented in the Election Administration of Georgia in terms of remuneration rules and to examine the challenges that the institution faces in this direction.

As the statement explains, based on Public information and analysis of legislative frame, it was determined that the amount of salary/award and bonuses paid in the institution(CEC) is changeable, therefore, ISFED finds the criteria used to define the amount of money uncertain. As the statement reads, alongside doubled salary during election months, bonuses are paid as well, the purpose of which is unknown for ISFED, since doubled salary defined by the law is paid exactly due to a variable working schedule.

According to the ISFED report, in 2016-2017, during elec-



International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy.

toral as well as non-electoral periods, officials and members of CEC were frequently receiving bonuses or salary supplements equal to the salary and sometimes even more than the original salary, whereas they had been already obtaining doubled salary in times of electoral months.

ISFED notes that similar cases to this were also observed in July of 2019.

The report showed that in 2018 and 2019 years, the frequency, as well as the amounts of awards and salary supplements, diminished, which presents a positive tendency according to the ISFD. For instance, from 2016 to 2019, the share of supplement received by the officials of CEC in the total remuneration diminished from 32.3% to 12.1% and the share of bonus/award decreased from 16.2% to 1.2%. However, these

changes were implemented at the expense of increasing the salary amounts, which according to ISFED means that the expenses defined for supplements and bonuses/awards were transferred to the salary.

In the statement, ISFED notes that the criteria, periodicity and percentage capacity of increasing the salaries are not defined, thus ISFED finds the ground of increasing salary in 2018 incomprehensible. It is noted that the salaries of the chairman, deputy and secretary rose by 50%, 68% and 70% and

the salary of the first category minor specialist increased by 65%.

ISFED shares recommendations for CEC, "which come in compliance with legal content and the standards of data transparency." According to the recommendations, parallel to doubled salary, supplements should not be paid; periodicity of granting supplements is desired to be defined and salaries, bonuses and awards of CEC's every member should be public as it is in the case of CEC's Chairman, deputy and secretary.



According to ISFED, in 2019, the salary of CEC's Chairman amounted €138015.

EU4Youth project encourages young entrepreneurs in Georgia to join

On 17 July, a team of EU4Youth Social Entrepreneurship in Armenia and Georgia (SEAG) project visited Telavi town in Kakheti region of Georgia to meet young entrepreneurs.

This meeting was followed by another meeting on 22 July with Azeri ethnic minority young women entrepreneurs and victims of violence from Marneuli Municipality, Kvemo Kartli region.

During the meetings, young people had the opportunity to ask questions and get comprehensive answers about the project activities. The main aim of meetings was encouraging them to register online and attend upcoming one-day introductory training on social entrepreneurship.

EU4Youth Social Entrepre-



neurship in Armenia and Georgia (SEAG) initiative fosters youth employment and societal change through the Social Entrepreneurship in border regions of Armenia and Georgia. Project supports development of the entrepreneurial potential of young people (ages 18-29) from Armenia and Georgia in the field of social entrepreneurship, notably with a view to contributing to social cohesion, employment, inclusion, and reduction of inequalities.

The project is funded by the European Union under its EU4Youth Programme.

THURSDAY		JULY 30
Day		Clear
		High: 30°C
Night		Clear
		Low: 21°C
FRIDAY		JULY 31
Day		Partly Cloudy
		High: 31°C
Night		Partly Cloudy
		Low: 20°C

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CHOPORTI RAISES QUESTIONS FOR ALL OF GEORGIA

The news filtered into the village like sun through the vine leaves on balconies and in the fields: "Have you heard?" Was this one of the long-discussed highway projects that had been rumored for years, and how will it impact each of us? Would the 4-lane highway run over traditional lands and homes? Would it destroy the forests and wetlands of the Aragvi River, including the lake-reservoirs of Tbilisi's drinking water that had been so carefully monitored and protected for almost a century? The questions multiplied until February 2020, when a meeting was called at the Choporti public hall to discuss the planned four-lane highway to connect Natakhtari to Jinali by crossing through Choporti, Abanoshkhevi, Bulachauri and Kubriantkari.

The Italian company Anas came to the packed meeting to that Anas is implicated in.*) He implied that Georgia would remain 'backwards' until super-highways 'save' the country.

At the same time, another peril was threatening—the viral pandemic; later it would be difficult to hold community meetings, meaning it would be hard to learn more about the plans being made by the Asian Development Bank, Anas Italy, and the Government of Georgia. (The national Government has used the pandemic as a reason to move forward with this project without going through the *mandatory public hearing* by the Ministry of Environment.)

Choporti is one of the first villages after Kartli, in the Dusheti district of the Mskheta-Mtianeti region, on the 'military road' built in the time of Katherine the Great. The region has sometimes been seen as one of

region. Most have crops and livestock that they raise for most of what they need. It is a modern example of a subsistence economy, and reflected in the EU common agricultural policy (CAP) that combines "social, economic, and environmental approaches on the path towards achieving a sustainable system of agriculture in the EU". Unfortunately, the proposed highway project has not carried out a professional economic impact assessment.

By no means isolated, however, Choporti has direct, regular public transport connecting to Tbilisi. Locals swim in nearby lakes and streams; they fish and hike near the famous Aragvi River that descends from near Pasanauri north of Choporti. Without the schism of rich and poor found in Georgia's urban areas, solidarity is strong. In Soviet times, Choporti had already shown its sense of identity when it successfully refused a planned railway through the area.

Today villagers stand with determination to clarify questions such as why one of the more feasible alternative routes be used; a recent meeting on 26 July showed how impassioned people are to preserve the lakesides and water catchment areas, their school and the village's integrity. The project would bring 24-hour noise and diesel pollution, traffic danger and destruction to both domestic animals and wildlife, the school and neighborhoods. Serious geological and hydrological studies have not been carried out for massive high-vibration and noise pollution. (Neighboring Bulachauri, famous for its oldest traditional village restaurant, dating from before Perestroika, would be slashed into two parts. However, villagers there are still not informed, and becoming alarmed.)



Astonished villagers speak with press July 2020

In early May, Choporti formed a citizens' group and later wrote, requesting the highway route to be changed to suggested alternatives, addressed to both the ADB and Georgia's Prime Minister, but has received no answers. *The direst aspect of this project is the lack of transparency, no democratic processes and unclear motivations—both financial and geo-political.* There has been little or no information made available to those most concerned, and no nation-wide or local democratic consultation process.

Other European countries are signing on to, such as the European Green Deal.)

Beyond the social, environmental and economic issues of Choporti and the three other surrounding villages, central government's silence has caused rumors to swirl, while the topic gets wider, national attention. A comment heard was that this seems to cater to Russian development more than local Georgian populations. It seemed to be "a slap in our country's face, especially since Russia already occupies more than 20% of Georgian territory". This Natakhtari-Jinali section is a part of the large scale highway to Russia that aims to turn Georgia into a transit country through the North-South corridor project.

Meantime, even though keeping updated on national and international issues, local citizens continue to face serious challenges during the pandemic, including education and health. They are most concerned about their land plots, their crops, and harvests on their way. The marvelous cloud formations over the surrounding hills, the clean air and a view of Mt. Kazbegi on a clear day give the village a solid sense of permanency that local citizens are determined to keep.

M.E. Chatwin/
photos: N. Khundadze

*"There are about twenty badly-damaged motorway bridges in Italy currently under investigation. There are also 200 illegal tunnels that don't comply with European standards." EuroNews, Feb 2020.



Worried villagers at Feb meeting

announce their intentions, villagers came to have concrete answers at last. They listened and questioned the presentation with growing alarm. Leaving the meeting, local Choporti citizens assessed the presentation as a big joke; they were frustrated at the vagueness of responses to valid questions and the disrespectful attitude of the authorities, especially the representative from Anas, who vaunted northern Italian industrialization as "being due to our great highway systems", while carefully avoiding mention of the Genoa bridge tragedy or other questionable construction fiascos

Georgia's poorest, yet proud and traditional—many emigrated from Georgia, working to improve the lives of those back home, then returned from Europe, the US and elsewhere after studying or working, to develop their village.

Choporti also has cause for fame and excellence. At the mention of the village's name, Georgians' immediate response is "Wow, tomatoes!" The pale red, juicy "Choportula tomato", developed in Soviet times, gained fame well beyond its borders. Today villagers proudly grow these and other crops and credit the pure water and air of their



Choporti women need answers



One of Choporti reservoirs July 2020



Anas Italy presentation of project Feb 2020



Waiting for news



Senior villagers discuss the project



Anger but no information