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Danube dikes give way; thousands flee flooding

Romania sees worst of it, 2,800 people evacuate overnight



Srdjan Ilic / AP

Flooding along the Danube River includes this neighborhood just outside Belgrade, Serbia, seen here on Monday.

BUCHAREST, Romania - Thousands of Romanians fled their homes overnight and thousands more faced the same fate on Monday when the swollen river Danube breached waterlogged dikes and threatened to break through more defenses.

The evacuations dashed hopes that the worst was over as Europe's second-longest river retreated more slowly than expected from its highest levels in a century.

Fed by rain and melting snow, swollen waterways have swamped vast tracts of land in Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary this month, driving thousands of people from their homes.

In Romania, the worst-hit country, where tens of thousands of hectares are submerged, some 2,800 people moved to high ground overnight after dikes near the southern villages of Bistret, Spantov and Oltina collapsed under the floodwater's pressure.

More people were on the move on Monday with furniture and belongings crammed into army trucks, tractors and horse carts, and authorities said some 4,600 in all were expected to flee in the coming hours.

"The water is close to Bistret. We have to evacuate all the villagers this evening," Mayor Constantin Raicea told Reuters.

Soldiers set up tents on higher ground near Bistret to house some 1,000 refugees, but Raicea said most of the 1,600 people evacuated were staying with relatives in neighboring villages.

President urges immediate evacuation

President Traian Basescu, touring the area, urged local officials to act quickly: "The villagers from Bistret need to be evacuated immediately. We have to evacuate the area using force because some people do not want to leave their houses."

Some 25 miles downstream in Bechet, a village of 5,200, rescuers geared up to take more people to safety as another dike crumbled in a nearby village.

"Around 30 families have moved to a neighboring village and we are now going to evacuate some 1,200 people," Bechet mayor Constantin Oclei told Reuters.

Soldiers and civilians built new berms and reinforced existing dikes to protect low-lying settlements in the area.

The floods forced hundreds of Romanians to spend Orthodox Easter Sunday — a closely observed holiday in the Balkans — in a bleak refugee camp away from their flooded village with little idea when they would be able to return home.

Officials said the Danube had receded where it leaves Serbia and enters Romania but there might be more breaches of dikes.

"Water pressure is very high on these earth dikes, and there are more in danger of collapse," said Elena Anghel of Romania's National Hydrology Institute.

Soldiers, civilians battle floods in Hungary

In Hungary, more large cracks had appeared by Monday morning in the dikes at the confluence of the Tisza and Koros rivers, where 6,000 soldiers and civilians battled the floods overnight.

Both rivers ebbed very slowly, by around 1 to 3 inches from the peak in the worst-hit area, and there was still pressure on the dikes, state news agency MTI reported.

The Danube originates in Germany and flows through or forms borders with 10 countries before emptying into the Black Sea.

In Bulgaria's Nikopol, a town of 4,000 which is half under water, several families evacuated over the weekend as water flooded their houses. In all, 61 people have fled the village.

"It's really difficult to make a prediction for the coming days," said Georgi Linkov, head of civil defense in Pleven, northern Bulgaria.

"We hope the rains the meteorologists forecast will not be pouring down, because there's a risk of soaking the dikes."

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