

Floods in southern Brazil kill 55, force 70,000 from homes

May 5 2024, by Carlos FABAL



A construction vehicle carries evacuees from a flooded area of the Sao Geraldo neighborhood in Porto Alegre, on May 4, 2024.

Raging floods and mudslides have killed at least 55 people in southern Brazil and forced nearly 70,000 to flee their homes, the country's civil

defense agency said on Saturday.

At least 74 people were injured and another 67 missing from the catastrophic flooding, civil defense said.

The toll did not include two people who died in an explosion at a flooded gas station in Porto Alegre, witnessed by an AFP journalist, where rescue crews were attempting to refuel.

Fast-rising water levels in the state of Rio Grande do Sul were straining dams and particularly threatening economically important Porto Alegre, a city of 1.4 million.

The Guaiba River, which flows through the city, is at a historic high of 5.04 meters (16.5 feet), well above the 4.76 meters that had stood as a record since devastating 1941 floods.

Authorities scrambled to evacuate swamped neighborhoods as [rescue workers](#) used four-wheel-drive vehicles—and even jet skis—to maneuver through waist-deep water in search of the stranded.

In addition to the 69,200 residents forced from their homes, civil defense also said more than a million people lacked access to [potable water](#) amid the flooding, describing damage as incalculable.

Rio Grande do Sul Governor Eduardo Leite said his state—normally one of Brazil's most prosperous—would need a "Marshall Plan" of heavy investment to rebuild after the catastrophe.



Map of Brazil locating the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul where floods and mudslides caused by torrential rains have killed dozens of people as of May 2.

In many places, long lines formed as people tried to board buses,

although bus services to and from the city center were canceled.

The Porto Alegre international airport suspended all flights on Friday for an undetermined period.

President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva posted a video of a helicopter depositing a soldier atop a house, where he used a brick to pound a hole in the roof and rescue a baby wrapped in a blanket.

Joao Guilherme, a 23-year-old salesman, found his way to safety in the state capital—but without his cell phone.

"I have no communication with anybody, I'm very shaken," he said.

The speed of the rising waters unnerved Greta Bittencourt, 32, a professional poker player.

"It's terrifying because we saw the water rise in an absurd way, it rose at a very high speed," Bittencourt said.



People and policemen carry the body of a victim after an explosion at a petrol station in Porto Alegre, Rio da Grande do State, Brazil.

'Going to be much worse'

With waters starting to overtop a dike along another local river, the Gravataí, Mayor Sebastiao Melo issued a stern warning on social media platform X, saying, "Communities must leave!"

He urged people to ration water, after four of the city's six treatment plants had to be closed.

In a live transmission on Instagram, Governor Leite said the situation was "absolutely unprecedented," the worst in the history of the state,

home to agroindustrial production of soy, rice, wheat and corn.

Residential areas were underwater as far as the eye could see, with roads destroyed and bridges swept away by powerful currents.

Rescuers faced a colossal task, with entire towns inaccessible.

At least 300 municipalities have suffered [storm damage](#) in Rio Grande do Sul since Monday, according to local officials.



A shelter set up in a gymnasium in Porto Alegre, on May 4, 2024.

'Disastrous cocktail'

Roughly a third of the displaced have been brought to shelters set up in sports centers, schools and other facilities.

The rains also affected the southern state of Santa Catarina, where one man died Friday when his car was swept away by raging floodwaters in the municipality of Ipira.

Lula, who visited the region Thursday, blamed the disaster on climate change.

The devastating storms were the result of a "disastrous cocktail" of global warming and the El Niño weather phenomenon, climatologist Francisco Eliseu Aquino told AFP on Friday.

South America's largest country has recently experienced a string of extreme weather events, including a cyclone in September that claimed at least 31 lives.

Aquino said the region's geography meant it was often confronted by the effects of tropical and polar air masses colliding—but these events have "intensified due to climate change."

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