

## KASHMIR NOW VERY VULNERABLE TO FLOODING

**While Srinagar residents hope the current flooding of their city will not be too serious, experts point out that this beautiful valley in the Himalayas is flooding far too easily nowadays**



Broken down old bridges across the river Jhelum impede the flow of water in Srinagar  
(Image by Athar Parvaiz)

Experts have warned that even if the Himalayan region of Kashmir gets away with relatively little damage during the current flood, it is still highly susceptible to flooding due to very high groundwater level, heavy siltation in water bodies and lack of action after last autumn's severe floods.

These warnings come as the river Jhelum recedes from the danger mark in Srinagar, summer capital of the state of Jammu and Kashmir in India. It did not rain on the first day of April, but more rain forecast by the meteorological department has kept alive the fear among the people of this flood-ravaged valley. Last September's flooding caused extensive damage to property in Kashmir besides killing over 300 people.

Many residents of Srinagar city have shifted their possessions to the upper floors and some have hired boats. Shopkeepers in Srinagar's commercial hub Lal Chowk have shifted out their merchandise.

Experts say that people would not have needed to take such frenzied measures after just a few hours of rain if some basic measures had been taken by the authorities following the September floods.

"Granted, a complete flood control programme would take at least three-four years, but some basic measures which we had repeatedly recommended after last year's floods should have been taken," Zahoor Ahmad Chatt, a flood-control expert, told [thethirdpole.net](http://thethirdpole.net).

According to Chatt, several breaches along the Jhelum and its flood spill channel have not been plugged properly. "Though the concerned department started plugging them, the job has not been done entirely." This Monday, a breach at an already damaged bank of a flood spill channel inundated a residential neighbourhood in Srinagar and damaged around 70 buildings.

Chatt said various barriers in the form of old-fashioned bridges, which are out of use, have not been removed despite knowing that they created blockades during last year's floods. "There are at least seven old-fashioned and worn-out bridges in Srinagar city which stay put even as the government had got seven months to remove them."

He observed that the entire city of Srinagar is below the Jhelum's high flood level (HFL), which means a blockade or breach anywhere along the river or the flood spill channel can cause inundation. "Even the old city, which is comparatively higher than the left bank or uptown Srinagar, is below the HFL."

Chatt added that other like tree clusters in the course of the Jhelum have not been removed entirely and other encroachments remain.

Prominent climate change expert Shakeel Ahmad Romshoo, who teaches earth sciences in Kashmir University, said that the huge flooding of Srinagar just a few months back and the extreme precipitation during the month of March have raised the ground water level thereby decreasing the water-soaking capacity of the soil.

Srinagar and other vulnerable towns in south Kashmir, says Romshoo, can be flooded any time even if they get away now. "This is simply because our flood control infrastructure has lost the capacity to hold and carry water,"

"The prevailing condition of this infrastructure suggests that it can crumble even under less than 40,000 cubic metres per second (cusec) of water." Before the September floods, the carrying capacity of Jhelum and the flood spill channel, as per Kashmir's Irrigation and Flood Control department, was 43,000 cusec.

According to Romshoo, hundreds of thousands of tonnes of silt were deposited in Kashmir's water bodies last year during the massive floods which, he says, should have been removed during the past seven months as the authorities knew that heavy rains occur in Kashmir from early March to May and have often triggered small or major flooding.

"Winter months are the most ideal for de-siltation as no rains occur during winter and the water systems remain almost dry. But, unfortunately the de-siltation process was quite slow due to which it was carried out only at some isolated places along Jhelum," he said.

"The government is well advised to start the process of de-siltation of all the water bodies across Kashmir as one of the basic short-term measure for controlling floods."

Besides, Romshoo said, there is an urgent need to institutionalise disaster management in the state by setting up of a vibrant and structured State Disaster Management Authority (SDMA). "The SDMA should have a clear mandate to build the capacity of the state to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all types of hazards the state is vulnerable to."

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