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The Activities of the Commission Investigating the Events of March in Itkhvisi Raise Concerns and Doubts

At the request of locals, an interdepartmental commission established by the Decree of the Government of Georgia is examining events that transpired in Itkhvisi in March 2022, three months after geodynamic processes damaged residents' homes in the area. The absence of an independent expert and a local representative in the commission's composition creates mistrust among Itkhvisi residents. Doubts are exacerbated by the fact that people are unaware of the commission's methodological approach. Furthermore, before the completion of the commission's work, officials of the local government offered insufficient and legally ambiguous compensation to affected families. The local population requests more information about the commission's work and asks the involved state authorities to ensure the commission's operations are transparent by making its protocols, plans, and deadlines public.

The government issued a decree on June 10, 2022, establishing a 15-member interdepartmental commission to determine the causes of the geodynamic processes that developed in Itkhvisi. Along with determining the causes, the commission was tasked with identifying the plots and residential houses in the disaster area. The panel includes officials from the Emergency Situations Division of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and officials from the Ministries of Health, Economy, Regional Development, Environmental Protection, and Agriculture. In addition, the commission included the mayor of Chiatura, Givi Modebadze, and numerous professionals from the relevant field. According to the decree, the maximum period of the commission's activity was set at four months.

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The Commission of Inquiry has been granted extensive authority; it may seek and review the blueprints for the layout of "Georgian Manganese's" mining operations, as well as other documents relating to Georgian Manganese's activities from the municipality and other state agencies. As the responsibility of the mining company in such circumstances is the most contentious issue, and a lack of information complicates its resolution, the commission's power provides a chance to objectively analyze and assess the involvement of "Georgian Manganese" in the tragedy.

However, the commission is closed to the public and has no local community or civil society organization representatives. A government decree stipulates that the committee can "if deemed necessary, for the thorough study of the state of the catastrophe zone and for establishing a future development plan, to invite experts, professionals, and organizations"; however, the committee has not yet used this authority.

In addition, some of the affected families have already received an offer of compensation, even though the commission has not yet concluded its work, and the local community is oblivious of its activities. Based on the evaluation completed by the Samkharauli Bureau of Expertise, the local government officials offered the families varying sums of compensation. However, the victims assert that the promised compensation does not represent the extent of the harm and cannot secure them alternative housing.

Nonetheless, it remains unclear how the disaster zone is defined and which households are considered victims. The interdepartmental commission should also respond to this inquiry.

As the commission examining the incident's causes has not yet submitted its findings, it is unclear how the disaster's region affected families, and the legal basis for compensation was determined. Clearly, the legal evaluation of the occurrence is

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contingent on its causes. Offering compensation without investigating the causes raises questions and suspicions. It is worth noting that, even when "Georgian Manganese" partially compensates the affected citizens in various villages of Chiaturi, the company denies its responsibility and credits the compensation to social responsibility. This approach makes it hard to lawfully control mining, effectively monitor it, and develop a consistent, fair standard of harm assessment and compensation.

In light of the mentioned, the necessity of the Commission's work being transparent cannot be overstated. For the public to have faith in the Commission's final findings and recommendations, it is essential that all material connected to the research be made public, including the reviewed documents, methodology, and on-site investigation results.