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'Every day I see land disappear': Suriname's battle to keep sea at bay

Suriname faces severe coastal erosion and rising sea levels, threatening communities along its vulnerable coastline.



A damaged house on the coast of the Weg naar Zee resort in Paramaribo. [Juan Barreto/AFP]

2 Jul 2025



Suriname, South America's smallest country, is one of the most vulnerable in the world to rising sea levels.

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Nearly seven out of 10 people in the former Dutch colony of 600,000 inhabitants live in low-lying coastal areas, according to the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

"Every day I see a piece of my land disappear," said Gandat Sheinderpesad, a 56-year-old farmer who has lost 95 percent of his smallholding to the sea.

Local authorities have for years been trying to find a way to hold back the tide.

"Some areas are not problematic because we have five, 10, even 20 kilometres (three, six or 12 miles) of mangrove" acting as a buffer between the waves and the shore, said

Riad Nurmohamed, Minister of Public Works.

But near Paramaribo, the capital city of Suriname, “there is just one kilometre so it’s a very vulnerable zone”, he added.

In 2020, a programme to restore the capital’s mangroves was launched.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres sought to add VIP power to the initiative in 2022 by wading into the mud to personally plant seedlings.

But five years later, Sienwnath Naqal, the climate change and water management expert who led the project, surveys a scene of desolation.

The sea is now lapping at the edge of a road and the wooden stakes to which he had attached hundreds of saplings are largely bare.

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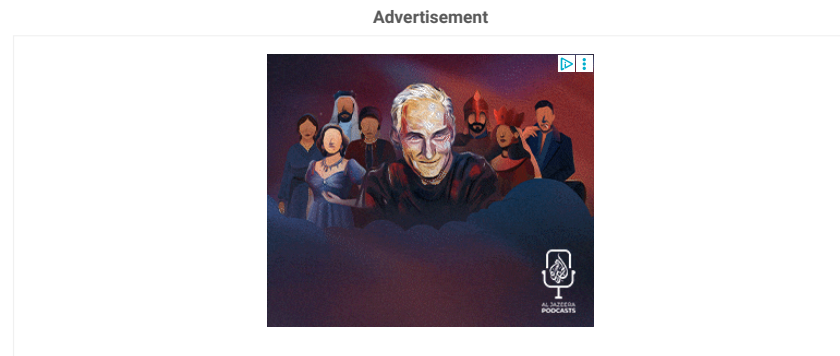
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High seas carried away the substrate sediment, leaving the roots exposed.

“Over the last two to three years, the water forcefully penetrated the mangroves, which were destroyed,” Nurmohamed said.



The dredging of sand at the entrance to the Paramaribo estuary to facilitate the passage of boats headed upriver to the port also contributed to the erosion, said Naqal.

But like the Amazon rainforest in neighbouring Brazil, the destruction was also deliberate in places, with farmers uprooting mangroves to make way for crops.

With the water lapping at the feet of Paramaribo’s 240,000 people, Suriname has changed tack and set about building a dyke.

For Sheinderpesad, the levee represents his last chance of remaining on his land.

“I have nowhere else to go. When we have the dyke, I will be safer, although I’m not sure for how long,” he said.

The 4.5km-long barrier will cost \$11m, which the government has promised to fund from state coffers.

“If you go see donors it takes years before you can start to build. We have no time to waste, we’ll be flooded,” Nurmohamed explained.

But plugging one hole in the country’s maritime defences will not suffice to keep the mighty Atlantic at bay.

The government wants to build up the entire network of dykes that dot the country’s 380km coastline.

It’s just not sure where to find the money.

“It’s a colossal investment,” Nurmohamed said.

The country’s newly discovered offshore oil deposits may provide the answer.

Last year, French group TotalEnergies announced a \$10.5bn project to exploit an oil field off Suriname’s coast with an estimated capacity of producing 220,000 barrels per day.



The coast of the Weg naar Zee in Paramaribo. [Juan Barreto/AFP]

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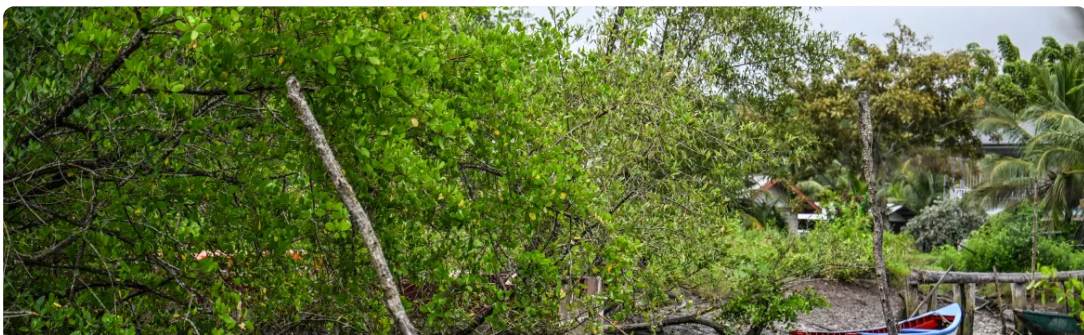
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Groynes on the coast of the Weg naar Zee resort. [Juan Barreto/AFP]



A sign reading "I love mangrove" on the Paramaribo coast. [Juan Barreto/AFP]





The dredging of sand at the entrance to Paramaribo estuary to facilitate the passage of boats headed upriver to the port also contributed to the erosion. [Juan Barreto/AFP]



Professor Sieuwnath Naqal, a researcher at Anton de Kom University specialising in climate change and water management, looks on at the coast of the Weg naar Zee resort in Paramaribo. [Juan Barreto/AFP]





The destruction was also deliberate in places, with farmers uprooting mangroves to make way for crops. [Juan Barreto/AFP]

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Suriname's government wants to build up the entire network of dykes that dot the country's 380-kilometre coastline. [Juan Barreto/AFP]

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