IF A DISASTER OCCURS, WILL CLEANUP BE POSSIBLE?

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Concerns about mining in Armenia

Joseph Dagdigian, Harvard, MA, February 2020

Recently news about mining in Armenia has intensified with issues related to the Amulsar mine topping the current list of concerns.

While exploring many small villages which outsiders seldom visit, I've encountered dammed up rivers with reservoirs of mine waste, valleys with mine tailings dumped onto their slopes, and near Kapan a huge lake of mine waste which seems to grow year by year. Two residents from an adjacent village indicated that children's health is being affected by the mine's pollution. To safeguard their children's health families are moving to Yerevan where, if work cannot be found, they will probably leave for Russia.

To the south, near Kajaran, a large valley is half filled with dry mine waste to the level of treetops. Where will rain water or melting snow falling into this valley end up? In Armenia's rivers of course, or perhaps underground aquifers, with minerals leached out of the mine tailings.

The profits from individual mines may continue for decades, but the toxic waste will last for centuries and perhaps forever. If mining continues indefinitely, how long will it take for large areas of the Armenian republic to cease being inhabitable? We cherish our 1500-year-old monasteries and fortresses, 2500-year-old Urartian sites, and remains of even older civilizations. With continued mining at the present or perhaps an accelerated rate, even with new "responsible" mining regulations, will much Armenia be inhabitable in another 100 years, 500 years, 1000 years? Will the containment dams or plastic or clay liners for waste dumps last 1000 years? Of course not. How about 100 years, or 50 years? And then what? Of what benefit is mining if, after the mines run out and mine workers are out of work, environmental destruction compels those remaining to leave the area? What has been gained? Who will pay for cleanups after mining companies leave or file for bankruptcy? If a disaster occurs, will cleanup even be possible?

There are few jobs in villages and farmers complain they cannot get their products to markets and earn enough to support their families. While some villages have opposed mining in their area, in other places mining unfortunately offers the only opportunity for some employment. Mining aside, it seems that development in Armenia is almost completely centered on Yerevan, eclipsing Yerevan's beautiful architecture. It appears to me that Armenia's former government has treated the country as

a city-state rather than a country. Little seems to be done to help development in Armenia's towns and villages. If things progress as they have been, even more villages will be abandoned. Development in Yerevan should be severely cut back and moved to Armenia's towns, creating employment opportunities other than mining, and supporting and strengthening Armenia's villages. But to do this infrastructure has to be improved to efficiently link these regions with each other and with Yerevan, and to ease access to markets for village economies.

I believe many organizations are doing the right thing, including the Tufenkian Foundation, COAF, FAR and a large number of others. But I saw no indication that the previous government was seriously addressing about these issues. Hopefully the current government will treat Armenia as a country rather than as a city-state, help villages, and find alternatives to mining.

For a previously published article about my observations search for "*Unseen Armenia, Destruction for Profit*".

Visit as well the August 2, 2017 special issue of Noyan Tapan newspaper, dedicated in its entirety to discussing the Amulsar Gold Mine.

There are no comments yet.