THE BATTLE OVER ARMENIA'S AMULSAR GOLD MINE

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Glenn Ellis, Al Jazeera, 31 January 2019

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It is now mid-winter, and at an altitude of 10,000 feet, millions of dollars' worth of trucks and machinery sit idle and frozen around the spectacular snowy summit of a mountain called Amulsar.

This is where gold was discovered 10 years ago, and we are the first journalists granted access to the site since the blockade began.

Before leaving Yerevan we'd met with Hayk Aloyan, Lydian Armenia's managing director. He was eager to explain the mine's significance and why the company want to develop it.

"During the last 14 years we have invested about $500m," he said. "This project is very important for the economy of Armenia. We designed it in a way to be environmentally safe ... there are no issues with water, no issues with the health of the community."

He then spelled out what the blockade was costing Lydian, "It's been about $100,000 , but now it's more because we lost key people, professionals. We had to terminate 1,270 contracts."

That seems to matter little to the mine's opponents who have been running the blockade via a network of small camps around the mountain. At any moment, they say they can call on some 6,000 people if needed - quite a claim given the remoteness of the location.

A temporary hut set up by activists and members of the public alike, participating in blockading the Amulsar mining project

We arrived to see one group just as they were opening a bottle of sparkling Armenian wine. Mkrtchyan Knyaz, a grizzled bear of a man, was celebrating his birthday.

"I am turning 60 years today," he told us, gesturing to the peak behind him, "and I'm ready to spend another 60 years supporting Amulsar. We will not allow her to be exploited."

Gagik Margaryan, a veteran from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, explained why he had come to the blockade.

"Our community mostly does farming, agriculture and gardening, and we all know perfectly well we can't carry on if the mine starts to work."

There were others here too, we discovered; tourist industry workers and villagers simply fearful that their lives will change if the mine goes into production. But all of them seem hardy and committed, determined to fight to the end.

A long history of environmental disasters

Hostility to mining in Armenia is perhaps understandable.

The country has a long history of environmental disasters relating to the industry come-and-go projects that, its detractors told us, had enriched a few but from which little or no benefits trickled down to local communities other than some transitory employment.

Instead, time after time, they have been left with land contaminated by toxic mine residue - left over heavy metals and poisons such as lead and arsenic. In a country so dependent on agriculture, this kind of pollution has become a critical and very controversial issue.

According to Gagik Avagyan of the Moscow Carnegie Centre, "Armenia has got only problems because of these mines. There are hugely corrupt scams, huge crimes. Like most developing countries only the elite have been profiting."

Irina Ghaplanyan, Armenia's First Deputy Minister of Nature Protection, agrees saying: "Lax legislation and very low fines on pollution led to an explosion of the mining industry … it's my personal belief and opinion that the mining sector is not good for Armenia."

Ghaplanyan is part of a new generation of politicians swept to office during the velvet revolution last summer when journalist-turned-politician, Nikol Pasinyan, began a long march to the capital from the west of the country, promising to end the endemic corruption and economic mismanagement that has dogged Armenia for decades.

Armenian opposition supporters walk on the street after Nikol Pashinyan announced a nationwide

campaign of civil disobedience in Yerevan, in May 2018.

By the time he reached Yerevan his support had grown to many hundreds of thousands.

The country came to a standstill as peaceful protesters defied ominous threats from the authorities and, incredibly, Pashinyan was eventually able to assume the role of prime minister without a shot being fired.

He consolidated this in asnap election in December 2018 when he won over 70 percent of the vote and a mandate for change.

Environment first?

Now, among the many pressing issues on his desk, is the question of what to do about the Amulsar mine.

Backed by the previous administration, it is currently on hold while Pashinyan ponders whether to let it go ahead. That is not a straightforward question.

For all the dreadful environmental problems mining has brought Armenia in the past, the country's battered economy is in dire need of the foreign investment and jobs that, properly run and managed, the industry could bring in.

Nevertheless, in the wake of the velvet revolution - and drawing inspiration directly from it - the protesters at Amulsar began their blockade in the hope the new government would take notice.

A few days before December's poll, Pashinyan travelled to the region to speak to the protesters and, though still outwardly noncommittal about what decision he will take, he dropped some reassuring clues when he told them he would always put the country's environment first.

He made similar hints during a speech at his next stop, at the spa town of Jermuk, which is just 9 miles from the mine site. The remarks were warmly received; this is Armenia's Baden-Baden and famous for its mineral water, sold all over the Caucuses.

Should any toxic discharge from the mine contaminate these precious aquifers, locals say it would be a catastrophe for the town.

The Amulsar gold mine is one of the most controversial projects in recent years in Armenia

Others told us there is an even bigger potential threat from the mine, that it could have a serious negative effect on Lake Sevan, the largest body of water in the whole of the Caucasus, holding some 25 percent of Armenia's fresh water.

It was to this extraordinary place we headed next. We had arranged to meet Levon Hkopyan, captain of a Soviet-era research vessel that monitors the lake.

"I was born on its banks," he told us. "Since my youth, I've been proud of the lake and I am still proud that I work on it, and live next to it. But we must do our best to keep it clean, transparent - to keep it the way it's always been. In my childhood, I drank this water. We drank it and washed with it at home. So there is no life for us without the lake."

At an altitude of 6,000 feet, Lake Sevan is a unique biosphere that attracts scientists from around the world. But Sevan is connected to the nearby Kechut reservoir by a tunnel which has been used since communist times to regulate the water level of the lake. In turn the Kechut reservoir is less than three miles (1.61km) from Amulsar.

Inevitably there's concern about whether any toxic discharge from the mine could also threaten Lake Sevan.

Artur Grigoryan, Armenia's Mining Inspectorate chief, admitted to being worried about the risk.

"Based on current documentation, no one really knows." he told us.

Lake Sevan holds almost 25 percent of Armenia's fresh water supply and is at risk of contamination due to the Amulsar mining project

When we returned to Yerevan we met with Malkhayan's boss, Karen Manvelyan, Head of WWF Armenia.

He showed us a map and explained that there are only two migratory corridors for the leopard in Armenia and that the Amulsar mine is slap bang in the middle of one of them.

"It comes from this area and goes like this," he said, tracing the route with his finger, "and you see mountains here - it's very important for migration of leopard and Amulsar connects both these ranges. This leopard is the last biggest cat of Europe and we should protect it."

From farming community protesters determined to protect their way of life, to people concerned about the potential of water contamination, to environmentalists desperate to preserve the unique habitat of one of the world's most endangered species (let alone government ministers openly critical about the damage caused by past industrial pollution), it doesn't seem like the vast mining project at Amulsar has many fans in Armenia.

But the lure of foreign investment is bound to be strong in a country whose battered economy is in dire need of a boost. Which way Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan will go, is an intriguing but as-yet unanswered question.

The mountain ranges of the Southern Caucasus provide refuge for several endangered animal species