



IWPR Caucasus Reporting Service
July 21, 2004

Yerevan Becoming A “Desert”: Officials begin to worry about the systematic elimination of green areas in the Armenian capital

By Susanna Petrosian

YEREVAN—The construction of an outdoor café on a leafy spot in central Yerevan was halted last week, in a sign that city officials are beginning to take on the unchecked building spree that has altered the face of the Armenian capital. The move has been widely welcomed.

“It is a precedent,” said Ruben Torosian, a prominent former member of parliament. “The fact that finally someone was stopped from building in the green zone is a positive sign.”

Gohar Oganezova, vice-president of Armenia’s Botanical Association, told IWPR that “this case can be seen as the first small result of our fight over many years against construction taking place on Yerevan’s green spaces.”

Before city authorities had time to issue their ruling, it took workers less than a day to chop down several old trees as they began clearing space for the café. Samvel Danielian, who is head of the architectural and town planning department at the mayor’s office, promised that the area would be restored to its former state.

But it is much too late to save large parts of the capital, which have lost their green spaces forever to a café boom of doubtful legality. Brash-looking cafes now sprawl across the entire city, depriving local people of parks and open spaces they used for decades.

“When they cut down all those trees, café owners hardly gave a thought about the future of our children,” said pensioner Arsen Darbinian.

“All the parks in Yerevan have been built over with cafés, and there’s nowhere for children to play or for us to relax,” said housewife Lilit Akopian.

Since 1990, the city has lost 40 per cent of its green areas due to new construction, according to research carried out by three organizations, the Yerevan Public Ecological Center, the Center for Regional Development, and Transparency International.

Thirty-eight environmental groups have banded together to protest about the loss of green space.

“If illegal construction of various buildings does not stop, Yerevan will soon become a desert,” warned Armen Dovlatian, leader of the Armenia’s Socio-Ecological Party, one of the protesting organizations. Srbui Harutiunian, another prominent environmentalist, said land was being degraded, landslips were increasing, and Yerevan citizens were suffering from new allergic illnesses as a result of the changes.



But Marzpet Kamalian, deputy head of the state expert commission at the environment ministry, rejected the charges, saying that the city was not at risk at all.

“The problem of desertification cannot affect Yerevan,” he told IWPR, asserting that only a rural landscape can turn into a desert.

At the center of the debate are Yerevan’s Ring Boulevard and the Opera Garden. Twelve cafés have already been built around the famous Yerevan opera house and three more are under construction. More than 100 cafes have been built on the Ring Boulevard, some of them made of stone, although it is explicitly forbidden by city laws.

Grachia Muradian, who heads the city department for control over town planning and land use, told IWPR that everything was under control and that the mayor’s office had stopped the construction of 10 cafés in green spaces this year. Muradian said planning regulations had always been violated in Yerevan but his office was closely monitoring the situation.

Samvel Danielian, from the same office, told IWPR that the café owners were used to getting round regulations by acquiring very small plots of land and then building outwards, but new city regulations were making it harder and harder to break the law.

Environmentalists are not impressed and say that city authorities have been turning a blind eye to blatant infringements of the law. Detailed reports by the Association of Investigative Journalists in Yerevan have recorded that the mayor’s office has been closely involved in giving the green light to building projects.

“The mechanism that the mayor’s office uses is the following: first a plot of land of 20 cubic meters, which does not need to be sold at auction, is allocated and then this plot is enlarged with the help of subsequent directives and decisions,” said Edik Bagdasarian, who heads the investigative association.

“We can’t say that the law has been broken,” Grigor Melkumian, chief advisor to the mayor, said in response to this allegation. “All decisions by the mayor’s office have received state registration. If the decisions were illegal, they wouldn’t have got state registration.”

But a former mayor, Robert Nazarian, has admitted that, “ninety nine per cent of buildings in the opera park are illegal and we did not approve those projects.”

Narek Sarkisian, until recently chief architect for the city, also conceded that pressure was put on him to approve construction projects. “I tried to do everything that was within my power, but people very high-up are involved and they believe they are above the law,” said Sarkisian.

If officials at this level are not ultimately responsible, who is? Edik Bagdasarian points the finger of blame higher up, saying that his organization has established that in the Ring Boulevard, the owners of cafés include four ministers, two generals, a deputy director of the national security service, and three heads of department in the mayor’s office. The men involved have either denied their involvement or refused to comment.

Armenia Tree Project



Yervand Zakharian, who has been mayor of Yerevan for just a year, has pledged to crack down on the illegal cafes. Many people are very supportive, but others are waiting to see what happens. “We’ve been deceived so much that we have to follow very closely what happens in the green zones,” said Oganezova.
