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March Is Tree-Planting Month in Yerevan

By Edik Baghdasaryan and Arevhat Grigoryan

The following article was published in the Armenian version of Hetq in March 2003. Since then, things have only gotten worse.

General Haykaz Baghmanyan's carrot-colored tufa house, with its garden and surrounding wall, sits up high, dominating this neighborhood that promises to become an exclusive compound for generals. Ordinary people who live nearby, in houses and apartment buildings, say the general's house was built by soldiers. Another general, Seyran Saroyan, is also likely to use Armenia's armed forces to build his new house. There's even a third general, building a third house. We managed to find out that he's from Vanadzor, but nobody dared tell us his name.

The large holes and newly uprooted tree stumps indicate that this plot has been sold as well. It looks as if the owner will soon cut down the remaining trees—their trunks are marked with x's. We gather that this plot has been given either to President Robert Kocharyan's brother-in-law or to his sister. Everyone we talked to in the neighborhood mentioned Kocharyan's name.

“This land does not lie within the park,” explains the chief architect of Yerevan, Narek Sargisyan. And indeed it doesn't, according to the general layout of Yerevan. But that's because even though the land is covered with trees and greenery, whoever drew the limits of the city parks chose not to include it.

The chief architect says people planted trees in vacant undeveloped land, which was envisaged in the city plan for development and paved roads. After the development work is done and Northern Avenue is built, all that will be left of 30,000 square meters of forest is a 3,000 square meter strip along Azatutian Avenue, perhaps to keep these fancy mansions out of sight.

Speaking of being out of sight, city land is supposed to be sold through an open tender. But of course in this case, no tender was held. Who would subject the appetites of General Baghmanyan, General Saroyan and a certain relative of President to a tender?

After the land was given away, they started cutting down trees, and the park watchman, who had tended the trees for thirty years, had a heart attack. The local playground was leveled and is now a construction site.

Armenia Tree Project



“There was never a playground here,” says Narek Sargysyan. “There was a meadow here, but no organized sports facilities... You newspapers always look for the negative. There is nothing wrong here. The city doesn't have a budget, we have to procure resources in order to build anything,” he continues. But instead of “procuring resources” through an open tender they just give this land away.

“In just two years you will witness the creation of a very nice new park here,” Sarkisyan tell us, sharing his plans for the future of the park. In other words, in just two years, there will be saplings in place of the 40- to 50-year old trees. We say 40-50 years old, but people who live here insist, “They were planted some 100 years ago. We have lived here for 40 or 50 years ourselves. There was a thick forest here, kids were afraid to walk through it alone”.

Soon the kids won't be able to walk here at all—it'll be private property, and they'll be trespassing.

And the trees that are still standing have no idea that this is not a park—they go on making oxygen for this suffocating city. The city, however, understands the mistake, and will soon correct it.