



Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

March 17, 2004

Cafe Boom 'Devastating for Yerevan Parks'
By Shakeh Avoyan

Recent years' dramatic proliferation of street cafes has inflicted twice as much damage on Yerevan's green belt as the severe energy crisis of the early 1990s that had forced many residents to cut trees for heating purposes, according to environmentalists.

The Social-Ecological Association, a local non-governmental organization, estimates that more than 700 hectares of green areas have been lost in the construction boom. The trees chopped down a decade ago covered only 300 hectares of land.

The head of the association, Srбуhi Harutiunian, said that the total area of the capital's greenery has shrunk from 570 hectares to 507 hectares over the past year alone. "That has mainly been due to construction carried out in parks and other green areas," she told RFE/RL.

The myriad cafes and other entertainment sites have already changed public parks in the city center beyond recognition. Their owners, many of them ministers and other influential government officials, routinely cut old trees to make room for the highly lucrative business. The Yerevan municipality has faced a barrage of criticism from environmental protection groups for allowing the shrinkage of the green zones, which they warn, is having an adverse impact on the environment.

Yerevan's former presidentially appointed mayor, Robert Nazarian, effectively admitted shortly after his sacking last October that he was often ordered to make land allocations by more powerful officials. He also said that almost all cafe owners flouted their license terms by grabbing more land that was rented to them and constructing illegal premises on it.

The authorities have not made public the amount of revenues the city gets from the mushrooming eateries. The current mayor, Yervand Zakharian, suspects that the municipality is being cheated by the businesses. Zakharian, according to his deputy Kamo Areyan, has issued subordinates with a "strict order" to inspect their operations.

Some NGOs claim that Narek Sargsian, the municipality's chief architect who has kept his job under three different mayors, is key to the land grab. "He ensures the continuity of the process," said Gohar Oganezova of the Armenian Botanical Society.

Armenia Tree Project



Oganezova also complained that relevant government officials usually blame the problem on their predecessors or other government agencies. Environment Minister Vartan Oskanian appeared to do just that on Tuesday when he claimed to lack the authority to curb the destruction of trees in Yerevan. “Protecting trees in the city is the municipality’s job,” he told RFE/RL.

Ayvazian also stated bluntly that his ministry is often reluctant to bring offenders to book because it does not want to hinder Armenia’s ongoing construction boom.