

Armenia May Struggle to Repopulate Border Areas

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Former residents of war-damaged region offered compensation, but reluctant to return because of security concerns.

The Armenian government has finally stepped in to help citizens forced out of villages by Azerbaijan's bombing during the 1992-4 conflict to return.

But the villagers, whose homes are close to the volatile border with Azerbaijan, say without security the proposed package of compensation could prove useless.

Under the scheme, owners of destroyed houses in villages like Chinari – which is almost on the border itself – would receive 7,700 US dollars to help them restore their homes, as well as money for tools, transport and general expenses.

The government is confident that the almost 40 million dollars committed to the plans will entice the villagers home, and once again populate the semi-deserted territory.

This would be good news for Chinari, except that the two sides have still not come to a peace settlement and the village still comes under fire on a regular basis. Residents doubt their displaced neighbours would come home even with the money.

“When I ask the children whether they'd like to live in another place, they always say their village would be the best in the world, if only there was no shooting,” said Gyoza Hovakimian, teacher of the youngest classes in the village school.

The two countries fought over the enclave of Nagorny Karabakh, which is mainly inhabited by Armenians. The territory proclaimed itself an independent state in 1991, but is unrecognised internationally and only linked to the outside world via Armenia. Fourteen years after a ceasefire was agreed, its defiance still prevents a thawing of relations between Yerevan and Baku.

The Azerbaijan army's positions are just on the other side of the valley from Chinari, and its guns control 90 per cent of the residents' land. Just in June, a sniper killed a young man there, prompting three more families to leave, and local officials say it has been targeted by heavy machine guns 30 times in the last six weeks.

Hovakimian just shook her head when told about the government's plans to return residents to Chinari, where a third of the houses are in ruins.

“They should come and ask us, we don't want money. If the situation just got a bit better, and there was no shooting, then people would stay here. We can earn money for ourselves,” she said.

Although her school has 170 pupils, half of the village's inhabited houses are home only to pensioners. Many young families have left for a more secure life elsewhere, and Samvel Saghoian, the head of the

village administration, said money would not be enough to entice them back to the half-deserted village.

With the nursery school overlooked by Azeri positions, people just do not feel that the village is a secure place to raise children.

“People left for only one reason – because of the shooting. They didn’t live badly, but the children had no future,” he said.

His is a viewpoint heard in villages throughout this north-eastern part of Armenia. In Nerkin Karmraghbiur, which is around 700 metres from the border, many houses are similarly damaged by the legacy of artillery fire.

“In 1992, three shells hit our house at once. We could not save any of our property, except a chair, and even that has not survived,” said Asmarik Ebijian, a former resident of the village.

She said her family had tried to repair the house, and even received government money to help with the roof. But, in a sign of the difficulties Armenia will face in repopulating its frontier zones, the Ebijian family gave up the struggle six years ago and left for Yerevan, where its members could be assured of a better life.

“My husband drives a minibus, my daughters study, and I come here for nine days a month to look after the garden,” she said.

She hoped that after her daughters get married, she and her husband could return home and live as they did before.

“And if they help us with the repairs, then that’s even better,” she added with a smile.

But local officials said people like her may have an unrealistic view of how easy it is to live in Nerkin Karmraghbiur, where 17 residents were killed in the war by artillery, and 30 families abandoned their homes.

Henrik Galstian, who teaches the village’s 136 children history, said many of his pupils want a good education only so they can leave and find work and security in the cities. They do not see a future for themselves in the little village.

“Financial help is of course necessary, but the most important thing is security and peace,” he said.

The government adopted the resettlement plan in September last year, but does not yet have the 38.52 million dollars it needs to fund it. It is currently appealing to international donors, including the United Nations, for help.

Some officials wonder how much of the money will actually be needed. According to Gagik Eganian, head of the migration service, as many as 26,000 of the refugees from the border areas may have already left the country and are unlikely to return.

“Exactly 2,604 of the displaced people remaining in the country have expressed a desire to return to their previous places of habitation, if the necessary support is provided,” he said.

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