

Armenians Fight Uranium Mine Plans

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Residents of southern region say life will be untenable if mining goes ahead.

Residents of Armenia's southernmost region are threatening to block a major highway if the government presses ahead with uranium ore prospecting in the area.

The hills around Lernadzor, 340 kilometres south of the capital Yerevan in the Syunik region, bordering on Iran, have been seen as a potentially rich source of radioactive ore since initial surveys were done in Soviet times.

Exploration work is expected to continue until 2014, despite the fears of people living here that the drilling and any subsequent mining will contaminate ground water and pose a serious risk to human health.

"We will block the sole road that connects Armenia to Iran," said Khosrov Harutyunyan, who leads one of several community groups that recently appealed to the government to halt the work. "We will lie down on the asphalt and we won't allow it to continue.

"We are the ones who live in this region, and it is we who will have to suffer the consequences of this uranium," he said.

The threat to blockade the highway is significant as it is one of only two land routes out of the country, because of Armenia's ongoing standoff with neighbouring Azerbaijan. The road south through Syunik to Iran is seen as a strategic lifeline at a time when the Armenian economy is already very weak.

Environmentalists and local community members say they are prepared to take this drastic measure because the government is not taking their concerns seriously.

"They might at least asked the residents of Lernadzor their opinion... It's our lives that are being put at risk," complained Rafik Petrosyan, a local resident.

Community groups have held a number of meeting in Kapan, the regional centre, and last week sent a joint statement to the president, parliament and cabinet to voice their concerns. A petition calling for a halt to exploration has so far gathered around 7,000 signatures.

"Any informed person will realise that you can't live here if there's uranium mining going on, because it will put your own life and that of future generations at risk," said Vladik Martirosyan, the head of Khustup, an environmental group in Kapan.

Armenia has few other natural resources, and the authorities sees the possibility of exporting uranium to states with nuclear industries as a valuable opportunity, for geopolitical as well as economic reasons.

"Uranium is a good source of income as it's the only natural resource whose price has gone up twenty-fold in the last few years," Energy and Natural Resources Minister Armen Movsisyan said.

Armenia has one nuclear power station, but any ore extracted around Lernadzor will go to Russia for enrichment. The exploration work is being carried out by the Armenian-Russian Geological Company, a joint venture between the government and the Russian state-owned nuclear energy company Rosatom.

Movsisyan insisted that were mining to go ahead, modern technology would eliminate safety risks, while radiation would only be an issue at the enrichment stage in Russia.

He said the initial exploration project posed no dangers, and accused the media and community groups of overreacting.

"At the moment all that's being done is a survey of the area," he said. "First we have to assess whether there's evidence of uranium ore deposits in the area, and then we'll need to do prospecting to find out whether the uranium is actually there."

Hakob Sanasaryan, a prominent Green activist in Armenia, argues that Armenia is too small to accommodate a uranium mining industry.

"It would be an ecological disaster in a country that covers an area of only 29,000 to 30,000 square kilometres. You can't open up all the deposits in such a small country," he said.

In Syunik region, Martirosyan said he hoped the dispute would be resolved without residents having to

carry out their threat, but warned, “If they don’t take our opinion into account, if they go against our will, then we will cut the road.”

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