

Armenia's Traffic Toll

Author: [Rita Karapetian](#)

Unregulated and dangerous public transport system is costing lives in Yerevan.

Last month a busy intersection in the centre of the Armenian capital Yerevan was the scene of a major traffic accident that left six dead and 12 seriously injured. Two children and two elderly women were among the dead.

It later turned out that one of the drivers, who died in hospital, was carrying neither a driving license nor a certificate of roadworthiness for his vehicle.

In the last few years accidents like this have become more and more common as the Armenian capital, with a population of one million people, has grown to rely on one means of transport, the shuttle taxi or "marshrutka", a minibus running along a set route.

Most of the vehicles are old or in disrepair, and this leads to numerous crashes. Levon Virabian, deputy chief of Yerevan's traffic police, said the number of traffic accidents has doubled this year.

Areg Barsegian, who heads the transport department in the Yerevan mayor's office, said that minibuses currently carry three-quarters of all passengers. He said there are now more than 2,500 minibuses in Yerevan. One in three are operating illegally.

Some drivers manage to get unroadworthy vehicles into service by presenting another minibus for inspection, then putting its license plates on another one. These unsafe vehicles are the ones endangering people's lives.

Traffic policemen allegedly help keep the vehicles on the road by accepting bribes to turn a blind eye to the poor state they are in. "We are aware of the problem, and we know urgent action is needed," said Ararat Maitesian, Armenia's senior deputy chief of police.

Since last month's tragic accident, the authorities in Yerevan have taken a few measures such as banning the widespread practice of allowing extra passengers to stand in ordinary buses as well as marshrutkas when there are no seats left.

"The drivers will get around the ban by telling passengers to sit on each other's lap in a crowded marshrutka," said Naira, a Yerevan resident. "If everyone is sitting down, police inspectors won't notice there are too many people inside."

After a recent inspection of marshrutka minibuses, several hundred vehicles were impounded and many drivers fined.

But this only made things worse for regular passengers, who now have to wait in long lines to catch a minibus during the rush hour.

The mayor of Yerevan, Yervand Zakarian, also issued a decree banning the shuttle taxis from running after midnight. As the city authorities made no move provide alternative means of transport, the measure angered passengers even more.

"In 1993, when the energy crisis was at its height, there was no electricity or fuel in Yerevan and we had to walk everywhere," said Robert, aged 50. "But at least then we knew nothing could be done about it. Why do we have to walk now?"

Opposition politicians blame the government for the growing transport problems.

"The authorities have never regulated the public transport sector in Armenia, leaving it to its own devices," said opposition deputy Manuk Gasparian. He said that the state has allowed the public transport system to be bought up by businessmen who have bought up second-hand minibuses and designed their own routes. And, claims Gasparian, officials earn kickbacks from this arrangement.

"There are many opportunities for illegal business in Armenia's public transport system," agreed Viktor Dallakian, a member of the parliamentary commission on legal matters. "If the government intends to fight corruption, it should target public transport. That won't be easy because many high-placed officials and some lawmakers have invested in the private transport services."

Another leading opposition figure, former mayor of Yerevan Albert Bazeyan, who heads the Republican Party agreed, "Public transport in the city is operated by people protected by the authorities. The business generates enormous profits, but no tax is paid."

IWPR asked Yerevan transport official Barsegian to comment on these allegations that corruption plays a part in the problem, but he refused to comment.

Yerevan has always been plagued by transport problems, but recently the situation has got a lot worse. The city had high hope for its underground rail system, launched in the early Eighties, but lack of funds meant that construction was discontinued after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the few metro stations that operate are unable to cope with growing numbers of passengers.

"The current state of affairs in Yerevan's public transport system is a direct result of lack of state funding," said economic expert Harutiun Khachatryan. He said that services that operate large vehicles cannot survive without government subsidies, so the minibuses filled the gap in the market. But now there are so many filling up the streets that people are once again discussing bringing buses and trolleybuses back.

"All these bans, introduced overnight, severely limited the carrying capacity of the minibuses without offering anything in return," he said.

To replace at least half of the minibuses, the city would need 500 regular buses working two shifts a day.

At the moment the city only has ten second-hand Renault buses donated by the mayor of Lyons in France. Twenty-two more buses arrived two months ago, but the Yerevan mayor's office has not yet decided where to use them.

Andranik Manukian, Armenia's transport and communications minister conceded to IWPR that Yerevan's public transport system was "wide open to criticism."

"Unfortunately the big buses have gone out of use and now most of the transport is being done by minibuses which, in my view, are a very uncomfortable and demeaning way for our citizens to travel," he said. Manukian said that the government is working on an emergency legislation package to regulate urban public transport, and a new law on traffic inspectors.

However, finance and economics minister Vartan Khachatrian said no funds had yet been set aside for public transport in next year's budget.

Rita Karapetian is a reporter for the Noyan Tapan news agency.

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