

## **Armenia's Vanishing Forests**

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Mass deforestation continues in northern Armenia, threatening dire environmental consequences.

The mountain slopes around Vanadzor, the third largest town in Armenia, were once thickly covered in forests, but there are hardly any left and the few trees that remain seem destined for destruction too soon.

Despite a World Bank programme aimed at stopping the logging, it appears to be continuing and no one in government is prepared to take responsibility for a potential environmental disaster.

"Only a tiny part of the forests was cut down by ordinary city residents," said Nataliya Agababian, a native of Vanadzor who witnessed the entire process. "The vast majority of trees were felled by the local authorities."

Agababian says that the felling of forest in Vanadzor has become a major industry.

"Look what is happening: the entire city has turned into a timber factory, manufacturing window frames, doors and parquet floors," she said. "Can't the authorities see this? And if they do see it, how can they allow it?"

The forests are supposed to be protected by law. And a World Bank programme, The Natural Resources Management and Poverty Reduction Project, approved last year, aims to "to promote adoption of sustainable natural resource management practices and alleviation of rural poverty" in the regions around Vanadzor.

However, the deforestation continues. Several firms have government licenses to carry out "sanitary logging". Several businesses, such as the Mach-Group or the Yerevan Furniture Factory, are also engaged, full-time and entirely legally, in manufacturing and selling furniture and other products from the timber industry.

Three years ago, 60 employees of the state forest service Haiantar (Armenian Forest) were accused of illegally cutting down 500,000 square meters of pine forest. However, several employees were subsequently acquitted, and the rest paid a fine and all charges were dropped.

The control inspectorate of the presidential administration is looking into Haiantar's activities, jointly with the police, but has so far not made any report on its findings.

Akop Sanasarian, the chairman of the Union of Greens of Armenia, says that local people play a key role in the illegal logging business, "All the residents of regions where there is wood heat their homes with logs in winter." They buy the so-called timber "off-cuts" after the "sanitary logging". Or they "comb" the forests of their own accord looking for trees to fell. And then they sell on the timber or use it to heat their homes.

Sanasarian blames Armenia's environment ministry, which has overall responsibility for the forests, for allowing these practices to continue.

Artsrun Pepanian, the ministry's press secretary, rebutted the charge and declined to comment on allegations of corruption, saying only, "The people who are accusing us should try themselves to work as forestry officers and receive a salary of 20 to 30 dollars." He said that they have begun entrusting the protection of the forests to several local authorities.

Because of the logging, the ecological situation around Vanadzor is getting worse and there is now an increasing risk of landslides.

"When it rains, torrents of dirty water come down from the mountains," said Vanadzor resident Grigor Avetisian. "The water floods our home, and more dirt comes with it than we have ever seen before."

Senik Bekchian, the main specialist of the agriculture and ecology department of the regional authority where Vanadzor is located, told IWPR that they had no way of preventing landslides and had only been able to study the problem.

Ruben Petrosian, from the environmental group Green Armenia, said it had developed a programme to restore the country's forests, costing one-and-a-half million dollars, but there were no funds to implement it.

Until recently, the woodlands of Lori, Vanadzor and Tavush provinces made up two thirds of the forests of Armenia. However, a recent report from the Centre of Ecological Research at the American University in Erevan, warns that if felling continues at this rate, in 20 years there will be no woodlands left in Armenia.

"A forest is not just trees," warned Professor Nora Gabirelian, head of department of classification and geography of higher plant life at the Institute of Biology at the National Academy of Sciences. "It is a living organism, and each cell is linked with the others. And if trees are chopped down without any system, then the consequences will affect everything: springs dry up, the biology is impoverished, and the climate changes."

World Bank experts have calculated that in the last 10-12 years, forested areas that once took up 11.2 per cent of Armenia has shrunk by a tenth.

However, Artsrun Pepanian of the environment ministry disputed the figures, saying that it was impossible to make an accurate assessment of this kind.

Pepanian said the situation was bad, but much better than ten years ago, when Armenia suffered a severe energy blockade during the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. "Up to 500,000 cubic metres of timber is cut down ever year - half of what the figure was 10 years ago," he said. "But at that time, the authorities closed their eyes to this, as people were living very badly."

Local people are less optimistic. "I can understand that trees were chopped down ten years ago so children could keep warm," said Vazgen Karakhanian, an unemployed man from Vanadzor. "But now? They take axes and destroy the forest. They don't spare anything."

Karakhanian says that felling of trees in Vanadzor reaches its peak in the winter months and a new season is beginning "All the neighbouring forests have been chopped down, and now they drive trucks higher into the mountains. When will it end?" he asked.

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