

Azerbaijani Border Villages Living on the Edge

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Residents were happy to get a new road linking them with the rest of Azerbaijan, but they lost their water supply in the process.

Residents of an Azerbaijani village close to the border with Armenia say they feel neglected by their government, and have seen little of the large sums of money earmarked for impoverished frontier areas like theirs.

Gushchu Ayrım, in the Qazakh district in northwest Azerbaijan, was once considered prosperous but is now barely surviving. It was badly damaged by fighting during the Nagorny Karabakh war of the early 1990s. Worse was to come, as residents found themselves surrounded on three sides by Armenian-held land, restricting their movement and leaving them constantly at risk of cross-border gunfire.

A 1994 ceasefire brought the Karabakh war to an end, but there has been no progress towards a political settlement, and shots are frequently fired across the front lines, in both directions.

The Azerbaijani government is trying to throw villages like Gushchu Ayrım a lifeline with millions of US dollars in infrastructure spending. Last year, it replaced the rough track leading to the village with 30 kilometres of asphalted road. The government's procurement agency, say the government spent 11 million manats (14 million dollars) on the project.

However, the villagers say they ended up worse off than before after their water supply was accidentally cut off by the road-builders. The mains pipe bringing spring water to the village was smashed to pieces.

"There's a spring on the edge of the village, right on the border with Armenia. The water from this spring flowed to the centre of the village, to the café," local resident Khanım İsmayılova told IWPR. "When they were building the road, it ended up being bulldozed. They gave us an asphalt road, but what are we supposed to do for drinking water?"

Her neighbour Nuru Hajiyev said the loss of the water supply was especially hard to take since getting the road had been such an achievement. Before it was laid, it was often impossible to travel out of the village in autumn and winter.

"We wrote and wrote everywhere, even to the president and the first lady. Finally, they found the money and the road was repaired," he said. "But now we don't have any water, since no one thought to repair the pipes."

Hajiyev said that when he asked the local authorities to carry out the necessary repairs, "they promised to do it, but they haven't kept their word".

The villagers have to get their water from sources in the surrounding hills, sometimes several kilometres away. Many use donkeys to transport the water, but İrada İskanderova does not have one so she has to carry it herself.

"If the water was just for drinking, we could carry as much as we need on donkeys. But we need a lot of water to wash clothes and ourselves," she said. "How are we to irrigate our plants and water our animals?"

Her neighbour Emil İskandarov described the particular risks of keeping livestock over the dry season.

"Everyone has two or three animals, and it's hot in summer and we'll have nothing to give them to drink," he said. "We'll have to take them to the spring, right on the border, and it's dangerous there. There are landmines, and the Armenians might open fire at any moment."

The mayor of Gushchu Ayrım, Elman Nasıbov, said villagers were overlooking all the good things the government had done for them.

"We have a new road and a new health centre. A new school building is being built, and it will be opened by this September," he said. "Damaged houses are being repaired. Problems are being solved all the time, and the water problem is going to be solved, too."

The physical risks and underdevelopment characteristic of border villages are forcing people to leave in search of work elsewhere, mostly in the capital Baku.

"Villagers are leaving areas near the front line because of the social problems," Natiq Jafarlı of the opposition REAL movement told IWPR. "As part of its regional development plan, the government has..."

assigned two billion manats [to border areas]. But like many others before it, this programme has not been completed, and many problems remain.”

Last month, Qanira Pashayeva, a non-aligned member of parliament, proposed a package of benefits for frontier villages – free utilities, free education, and incentives for businesses that created workplaces. Her proposal was backed by Aydin Mirzazade from the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan party.

Addressing parliament, Mirzazade added his own ideas – freeing farms and businesses from taxes, and paying teachers and healthcare workers higher salaries to encourage them to stay.

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