

## **Baku's Rubbish Tip From Hell**

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Burning waste creates environmental hazard, as scavengers pick through the trash.

Endless piles of smoking rubbish surround a giant pit filled with fire and smoke. Visibility is less than five metres. When an outside visitor comes to the Balakhany rubbish dump, he thinks he has arrived in hell.

The immense dump site sprawling over 30 hectares of land, lies some 12 kilometres from the Azerbaijani capital Baku. Every last cigarette packet and plastic bottle discarded in the three million-strong city ends up here.

Slowly making my way towards the "bottomless pit" in the middle, I ran into some denizens of this hell, armed with pitchforks and rakes. The faces of 13-year-old Hasan Abdullayev, 13 and his 18-year old brother Istyaq, were covered in soot – making them look like the "demons" the scavengers are often described as.

Hasan explained how they use the tools to find scrap metal, which they sell for 100 manats (around five US cents) per kilo. He said their father was ill, and this was their family's only source of income.

"We don't steal or bother anyone, we simply collect scrap metal and sell it," he said. Their family moved to Balakhany more than 10 years ago, and the brothers have worked here for most of that time. They don't go to school.

"Why go to school? Is it going to make a scholar out of me?" said Hasan. His mentor on the "job" was his uncle Maqsud, who is 35. Maqsud used to be an agronomist, but there is no longer any work for agricultural engineers in the area. "He was the first to move here; then we followed, and we've been scavenging for scrap metal ever since."

Viktor, 55, from the nearby village of Surakhany, said the dump provides work for between 350 and 400 people. Viktor, who used to be a house painter, now collects scraps of food at the dump for a businessman who feeds them to his pigs. "Who else is going to pay me a hundred dollars for eight or nine days' work?" he said.

According to Viktor, there's practically no end to what you can find at the dump. "Once I found a brand new leather jacket. It's very warm; I've been wearing it for two winters," he said. Hasan joined in the conversation, saying his uncle Maqsud found a 100-gram gold chain here last year.

Scavengers work the dump in groups of five to ten people, each specialising in its own type of rubbish: plastics, metals, bottles, or food waste. No one trespasses on others' "territory".

Javid, 26, from Balakhany and his neighbour Elnur, 30, hunt for bottles. Elnur used to be a sculptor but says he has given that up and now earns up to 300 dollars a month at the dump. "A sculpture can take you five or six months to create, but the money you get barely covers the cigarettes you have smoked while making it."

The scavengers are not afraid of picking up disease. "People sitting in office chairs are the ones who get sick," said Elnur. "I've been working here for seven years, and I've never even had flu."

Doctors are not so sure. Ismail Ibrahimov of the communal hygiene section of the Municipal Hygiene and Epidemic Control Centre in Baku, told IWPR, "Rubbish dumps are extremely dangerous. These people can easily contract salmonella, dysentery, botulism or cholera."

The village of Binagadi, four km, away is impregnated by foul smells. Local resident Sona Halilova, 63, who has asthma, said her house becomes uninhabitable in hot weather.

Byakir Muradov, 37, is trying to sell his house and move away. "I didn't mind the stench when I was on my own, but now I have a wife and kids, and I don't want them to breathe this foetid air," he told IWPR.

Many in Baku fear the Balakhany dump is an environmental disaster waiting to happen. Sabit Huseinov, deputy head of the city's housing and utilities department, told IWPR, "Several companies have approached us about recycling or otherwise using the garbage. The dump is currently serviced by the German-Azeri joint venture UPE, which is also keen to start recycling the trash, but we are still waiting for a solution to this problem."

The dump receives approximately 3,000 cubic metres of garbage daily, according to UPE employee Rza Mirzyayev. "Once there was a recycling plant in the area that processed garbage into fertiliser, but it has stood idle since the end of the Soviet Union," he said. "UPE has plans to start a recycling operation."

Mirzyayev said that UPE presses down the rubbish and levels it out with tractors, but never burns it. "It's these 'demons' who set it on fire," he said.

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