

## **Bleak Victory Day for Armenia's Veterans**

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Armenia is marking Soviet Victory Day again - but its Second World War veterans have little else to celebrate.

Arshak Pogosian, one of the foot soldiers of the Soviet Union's triumph over Nazi Germany, allowed himself some meat on Victory Day, the anniversary of the famous military breakthrough.

Generally, his main meal of the day consists only of boiled potatoes and a piece of black bread.

"It's upsetting that people remember veterans of the Second World War only on the May 9 holiday," Pogosian said, with tears in his eyes. "But we have to live on all the other days of the year as well."

Some 600-700,000 Soviet Armenians fought in the 1941-45 war, of whom around a half died. Pogosian is one of around 15,000 surviving veterans.

Members of this diminishing group - several thousand die each year - currently get a pension of no more than 4,000 drams (about seven US dollars) a month. It's set to rise by a third this year.

Many war veterans, particularly those without any family to support them, are forced to work at menial jobs well into old age.

"Street trade long ago stopped bringing in any real income," said Varuzhan Grigorian, a war veteran who has sold newspapers in the metro for the last eight years. "I earn practically nothing and I barely have enough for bread every day and sometimes a glass of milk. All the same, as I can't rely on state aid, it's better that I trade on the street. I can just about feed myself and I won't be sitting at home with nothing to do."

The veterans have the feeling that the state barely remembers them. May 9, celebrated as one of the great festivals of the Soviet calendar, was abolished as a holiday when Armenia became independent on the grounds that it was celebrating the victory of another state. But in 2001, to the delight of veterans who felt that their sacrifice was being denigrated, the holiday was reinstated.

Yet veterans' leaders complain that the government is still giving the wrong message.

"A little while ago a woman came to me and asked for some money for food with tears in her eyes," Perch Boshnagian, chairman of the Council of Veterans of Armenia and a member of parliament told IWPR. "She probably weighed no more than 40 kilos. And the problem here is not only that she was a war veteran but she was also a hero of Socialist Labour."

"After that how can I bring up young people in a patriotic spirit, instil a love of their country in them, when we have heroes living in this country without a piece of bread. There are some things which the authorities should not forget or allow themselves to do."

The government defends itself against charges of indifference by pointing out that veterans do a little better, relatively speaking, than some other groups in society.

"War veterans enjoy certain privileges, which other pensioners do not have," said Anahit Gevorgian, deputy head of the veterans and invalids department in Armenia's social welfare ministry. "For example, their pensions are higher and are assessed differently. Moreover, we have several social support programmes for veterans, which include caring for them at home, providing medicine, homes for the elderly and so on."

This year Robert Kocharian, who was re-elected president in March, allocated what the Council of Veterans calls a "significant" sum to their budget. "This will allow us to choose around ten to twelve veterans from each region and hand out aid to them," said chairman Boshnagian. "Each one of them will receive a sum worth roughly half their pension."

Nonetheless, veterans complain that their living allowances remain miserably low, while parliamentary deputies for instance get regular raises. "Pensioners drag out a miserable existence, as they live on starvation rations," complained veterans' leader Sarkis Grigorian. "And we could just go on and on about the list of disgraceful incidents that prove how heartless our leaders are."

It's no surprise that no one cares about veterans in a country where poverty is so widespread, observed Artashes Karapetian, an engineer, whose grandfather died at the front. "All the same, I'm angry that it looks as though the authorities have just decided to wait until there isn't a single veteran left in Armenia and only then start caring about them," he said.

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