

Chechnya: Ecological Woes

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Unchecked oil spills and radiation leaks are threatening the health of Chechens.

After almost nine years of war, Chechnya has become an ecological disaster zone, with oil and chemical leaking into the ground and radioactive material left lying about.

With few proper records and almost no monitoring going on, it is hard for Chechnya's environmentalists to draw a proper picture of the situation. But the poor health of the population at large suggests something is seriously wrong, as the republic shows a high child mortality rate and a large number of birth abnormalities.

The environmental threats are manifold and range from unregulated oil waste to unchecked radiation.

On satellite pictures, says Maxim Yakovenko, Russia's deputy environment minister, Chechnya looks like a "black spot". The reason is its makeshift and unregulated oil industry. Yakovenko estimates that upwards of 20,000 tons of oil may have leaked into the ground since 1994.

"There are between 1.5 and 2 million tons of oil and oil derivatives floating on the surface of Chechnya's underground waters," environmentalist Sharpudi Astamirov told IWPR. "The scale of underground water pollution in Grozny is unheard of. It will take a long time, lots of money, and innovative engineering solutions to fix it."

According to Astamirov, there is a real danger that oil pollutants in subsoil waters will leak into the Sunzha River, then the Terek, and finally flow into the Caspian Sea. He warned that a rise in the water table would lead to oil evaporating over large tracts of land, creating a high fire hazard that would be impossible to contain.

Then there is radioactivity. Taisia Mirzoeva, Chechnya's chief sanitary physician, set out the dangers posed by radioactive materials which have gone missing from former scientific or industrial laboratories. Before the war, there were 56 facilities in Chechnya which used what scientists call "sources of ionising irradiation," or SII. A 1995 audit established that 36 of them had been completely destroyed, and the location of their SII substances was not known. It is impossible to ascertain the total volume of radioactive materials that have gone missing as the documentation has been destroyed.

Kosum Khamadov, head of Chechnya's radioactive hygiene agency, said that there are such quantities of this material moving around unchecked in Chechnya, much of it in residential neighbourhoods, that Chechnya should be designated a radioactive emergency zone.

He said a number of containers with radioactive material were discovered in industrial and residential areas across Chechnya in April last year. Six of them were found close to government buildings in Grozny in March this year. But there is no radioactivity monitoring service in Chechnya that could locate, retrieve and bury these SII materials, he added.

Asked why there are no efforts to retrieve the missing materials, Colonel Oleg Zaitsev, head of the department for radioactive, chemical and bacteriological safety at the Russian Ministry for Emergencies, explained simply, "There is no money... Our functions at the moment are limited to control and information gathering. The rest is up to the Federal Security Service, the prosecutor's office, and Radon."

Radon, the body in charge of nuclear waste disposal, is the only organisation dealing with radioactivity safety issues in Chechnya. As a division of Russia's state construction committee, Radon employees are paid from Moscow. But to tackle the problem seriously they need special equipment, protective clothing and vehicles, none of which is available.

Local Radon director Ziyavdi Kadyrov told IWPR he had been writing official letters asking for help for the past three years, but so far no assistance has been forthcoming.

"Nowadays I only go to see the government to put on the record that someone there knows there's a problem," he said.

The highest radioactivity levels have been recorded in and around the chemicals factory in Grozny, where a radiation emergency occurred some time ago. There was no effort to clean up. In November 2000, 11 containers filled with caesium-137 were discovered by chance near a secondary school in Grozny. The radioactivity level in the area was ten times higher than normal. Over the past eight years, radioactive material has been detected in Chiri-Yurt, Shali, Vedeno, Gudermes, Argun and Grozny.

Chechnya is suffering a serious health crisis, and while doctors are cautious about directly linking it to environmental problems, the circumstantial evidence is strong.

"Every month at least one child is born with a hereditary defect," Svetlana Khubayeva, head doctor of the Maternity Hospital No. 1 in Grozny, told IWPR.

The statistics are alarming. Of the 521 babies born in Grozny so far in 2003, 29 have died. Eighty percent of pregnant women suffer from various diseases.

Doctors are also recording a growing incidence of premature births, pre- and postnatal pathologies, and a higher death rate among children under 12 months. Sadly, the trend seems to have become permanent.

Doctors conducting health checks among schoolchildren have found a high incidence of eyesight problems and complaints of the thyroid glands, ear and nose and throat, as well as anaemia. All this is compounded by the psychological stress caused by conflict.

Zalekhan Tangieva, deputy chief doctor at a day clinic in Grozny, told IWPR that the number of patients with heart conditions or high blood pressure has multiplied.

Contemplating the long-term effects of all this, Grozny resident Asiet Muzayeva recalled a stinging remark by ultra-nationalist Russian politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

"Zhirinovskiy was right when he said that those Chechens who survive will be left to die in the hospitals," she said.

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Location: Stavropol

Russia
North Ossetia
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