

## **Hard Road to Travel for Armenian Frontier Villagers**

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With their main highway shut because of the risk of gunfire, residents of northeastern district are almost cut off from the outside world.

Sixteen villages close to Armenia's northeast border with Azerbaijan have been effectively cut off from the rest of the country since late October. The main highway to the interior of Armenia has been closed because of the risk of gunfire from across the border, and minor roads are all but impassable.

On October 22, an Armenian soldier died and three were injured when their vehicle came under fire while travelling along the highway. (See **Armenian Soldier Killed in Fresh Border Incident** )

In response, the government ordered this stretch of road in Tavush region to be closed.

Another Armenian serviceman was killed by sniper fire on December 15 near the village of Movses, which lies on the same stretch of road skirting the frontier.

Residents of the affected area now have to rely on alternative routes going via the town of Berd to Chambarak and Ijevan, but both roads are in poor shape and are frequently blocked by winter snowfalls.

"The Berd-Chambarak road is always being closed. However much they clear the snow coming down from the mountains, it still blocks the road," Siranush Melikyan, a student from Berd, told IWPR. "And the Berd-Ijevan road has been in poor shape ever since it was built. It's no more than a track."

As a result, Melikyan said, travelling in and out of villages in this part of the border is difficult.

"If we want to get home, we can't do so safely on any of the roads," he said. "It's also important to consider what happens if someone falls ill. If we need to get someone to [the capital] Yerevan, that's a problem, since we're on the border where the shooting is incessant. If a soldier is injured, he can't be taken quickly to Yerevan."

Armenian defence ministry spokesman Artsrun Hovhannisyan told IWPR that the Paravakar-Vazashen highway was overlooked by Azerbaijani military positions located on higher ground. This vulnerability meant that extensive work would have to be done to make the route safe enough to be reopened.

"Earthen banks are being built for safety. But that's very difficult in this location," he said. "Our adversaries are high up and we are lower down, which means we'd need to build 50-metre earthen banks. Right now it isn't possible for us to make it completely safe."

Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a ceasefire agreement to end the Nagorny Karabakh conflict in 1994. While the truce has generally held since then, exchanges of fire occur both on the border between the two state and on the "line of contact" separating Azerbaijani forces and Karabakh.

Civilians in border zones live under the constant threat of gunfire. (See also **Gunfire as Extension of Politics on Azeri-Armenian Border.** )

Young people in Tavush region have written an open letter to President Serzh Sargsyan asking him to get the highway reopened and order repairs to the two auxiliary routes.

"People already feel isolated psychologically, and if the road is closed, this becomes dangerous," one of the signatories, Marieta Manucharyan, a student from the village of Varazavan, told IWPR.

Some local residents are still using the main highway in spite of the official ban. Roland Margaryan, the local government chief in the village of Paravakar, says he travels along it almost every day.

"Initially, the police and military required us to sign statements that if there was any shooting on the road, they wouldn't be responsible for our lives. They warned us that travelling was dangerous," he told IWPR. "Now they don't make us sign anything. The local residents go back and forth. It's true that the road is officially closed, but at the moment it's the only one we can use."

Officials told IWPR that work had begun on mapping out a 3.8-kilometre bypass going through a forested area that would avoid the most dangerous part of the highway.

People who have used the two other roads say they are so bad that they too are a danger to life and limb.

"Six weeks ago I came to Yerevan on the Berd-Chambarak road. The road was very hard to drive on. It isn't

even tarmacked, and cars get into accidents. Within the last week, two people I know have had accidents on that road,” Manucharyan said.

Tavush provincial governor Armen Ghularyan says the other road, to Ijevan, is currently being repaired and widened. The work will take six weeks to complete.

Tevan Poghosyan, a member of parliament from the Heritage Party, said the government needed to spend more money to secure the roads.

“Armenia needs to build an alternative road network further away from the Azerbaijan border. That’s the only policy that should be followed,” he told IWPR.

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