

Turkmenistan: Mystery Illness Blamed on Chemicals

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The official diagnosis is a run-of-the-mill illness, but doctors say it is pollution from Turkmenistan's cotton industry that is making people sick.

A mystery illness is causing alarm in the Turkmen capital Ashgabat, where residents are afraid that chemicals used on the cotton fields are making them sick.

Doctors say that since the end of September there has been dramatic increase in the number of patients from Ashgabat and the surrounding region complaining of flu-like symptoms including blocked noses, headaches, dry coughs and weepy eyes.

Ashgabat resident Natalya Ivanova said her entire family fell ill within two days, the youngest first. Soon all the children in her apartment block were sick with the same symptoms. "I called the doctor and questioned him carefully, and the doctor admitted it was occurring on a massive scale," said Ivanova.

The official diagnosis is acute respiratory disease, but some in the medical community are privately blaming the defoliants sprayed from planes to speed up the ripening of cotton plants.

"The number of people suffering from illnesses of the upper respiratory tract during the cotton ripening and harvesting period increases by dozens of times," said one health worker on condition of anonymity.

"Defoliants are highly toxic chemicals... easily carried in the air."

That the illness has proved resistant to traditional cold and flu treatments is also causing suspicion in the medical community.

"It's too early for a seasonal epidemic of acute respiratory disease," said a family doctor at one Ashgabat clinic. "Treatment with medicine designed for treating the symptoms of these diseases only improves the conditions of patients for a short period. It can be assumed that the reason... is the air that is inhaled."

An ear, nose and throat doctor in the capita; said most patients who come for help have been treated for respiratory complaints with no success, "On examination, it is discovered that for almost all the patients, the reason for the disease was an allergic physical reaction to an external irritant."

A woman from a village outside Ashgabat, told IWPR that all the residents are sick. "We were told it was flu by the doctor at the medical centre. But it's strange that this flu has still not gone away after four weeks, and it hit everyone almost simultaneously after they started spraying the cotton from the air," she said.

An expert in ecology and environmental protection said general air pollution could also be contributing to the problem. In addition to the cotton chemicals, many factories in the Ashgabat area are also pumping toxic fumes into the air. "There are no special purifying devices ... [and] the filters on chimneys are blocked up," he said.

Allergies, bronchial asthma and bronchitis caused by pollution were already common among the Turkmen population before the latest outbreak, he said.

An employee of the ministry for nature management and environmental protection told IWPR that a government supervisory group on the emission of toxic chemicals exists only on paper and does nothing to control the import and use of toxins, pesticides and other dangerous substances.

Such lax regulations, combined with a lack of concrete information on the source of the mystery illness, have contributed to the growing sense of panic.

Doctors say the government will do nothing to calm the situation, saying the recent outbreak has joined the long list of illnesses they are forbidden from diagnosing including tuberculosis, hepatitis, typhoid, cancer and AIDS. The logic behind this directive, analysts say, is that if these diseases do not officially exist in Turkmenistan, there is no need to set money aside to combat them.

“Unfortunately, we have an unwritten taboo for a number of diagnoses, and in this case we must tell our patients that it is a flu epidemic,” said a family doctor at an Ashgabat clinic.

According to a civil society activist, “When we went to government supervisory agencies and explained the situation, we were asked to provide documentary evidence, i.e. doctors’ diagnoses, confirming that the diseases occurred because of poisoning by chemicals. But these diagnoses do not exist here. It’s a vicious circle.”

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