

## **Villages Die Slow Death in Ossetian Mountains**

Last inhabitants of two mining villages cling on, defying resettlement and disease. Two hours along the mountain highway that links North and South Ossetia, an old half-empty bus makes a loud rattle as it turns off the road and heads deep down into a rocky gorge. The mountains around are a shiny metallic black. The bus descends to the mining villages of Sadon and Galon, sheltering underneath jagged mountains covered in half-burned vegetation.

This part of the Caucasus used to produce lead and zinc for the whole of Russia. Sadon and Galon were built by Belgian mining engineers in 1886 and had a population of 5,000 people in Soviet times.

Now they are all but deserted.

A massive flood four years ago overwhelmed the mines and destroyed most of the houses. Now most of the buildings are in ruins, there is no glass in the windows and rubbish lies strewn everywhere.

The government of North Ossetia took the decision to resettle the local inhabitants. Sergei Kalitsov, first deputy economics minister of the republic, told IWPR, "The financial help given to the people of Sadon and Galon was distributed on the assumption that every family would acquire housing in the town of Alagir."

Alagir is a town located at the edge of the gorge.

However, not everyone agreed to move. A total of 154 families are still living in the two villages in shabby, poorly refurbished apartment blocks from the Fifties and Sixties. There are no food shops, no schools and no doctor, and the nearest population centre, Mizur, is 12 kilometres away. The bus visits just twice a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon.

Those who stayed behind say they are afraid of dying if they move down to the plains. They say that two thirds of the population is sick with "the miners' disease" - silicosis that attacks the lungs, usually with fatal results. They believe that the mountain climate is kinder to their lungs than the air in lowland areas.

Frosya Jagayeva can list dozens of names of fellow-villagers who died after they were moved down from the mountains in 2002 to Alagir or Beslan.

Sixty-six-year-old Mair Bitarov has silicosis and stayed behind in Sadon, while his son moved to Alagir. Bitarov says he goes and visits only rarely. "I feel very bad there, I begin to get short of breath and cough up blood, which is why I have to stay here in Sadon," the ex-miner said in a quiet voice, coughing.

Valery Tautiev has lived in Sadon since 1980, when he left Vladikavkaz's mining institute and began working in the mines. He goes by the nickname of "Devil" because the metallic dust has eaten away at his face, giving him a swarthy complexion. Wiping hands worn by years of corrosion, he explains why he stayed.

“Some time ago I felt really bad and went to the doctor,” Tautiev said. “They said I had silicosis with fluid in the lung. I went to the TB clinic in Vladikavkaz and had an X-ray that confirmed the diagnosis. But the doctor asked me for money to register me as an invalid. I told her that if I had money, I wouldn’t be still here. The government doesn’t regard us as people, it thinks we don’t exist.”

His neighbour Frosya Jagayeva, whose husband died from silicosis, says Tautiev gets frequent bouts of illness, when all his friends and neighbours help him out – generally with a glass of vodka, because there is no doctor here and the ambulance refuses to travel to Sadon. After all, the village has officially been emptied and does not exist any more.

Recently a team of geologists visited the flooded mines and inspected them, raising hopes amongst locals that they might be restored to working order. “If they did that then Sadon and Galon would flourish again, people would return and the former glory would return too,” said Jagayeva.

But the authorities insist that there is no future for the two mining villages and that it would cost millions to restore the mine-shafts, while also creating new health risks.

Deputy minister Kalitsov said that the specialists visited the mines only to check tectonic activity in the surrounding hills. He said that there was a major risk of landslides that could cause further havoc, adding that this was another reason why the villagers should move out.

“There’s no way we can escape death,” said Tautiev. “I don’t want to say we’re under a death sentence, but that is the truth. We’re not asking the state for much, just for our homes not to be knocked down. We need a shop, a school for our children and a bus that goes more often to the town. We want to live out our days here.”

Zarina Khubezhova is a journalist with Vladikavkaz newspaper in Vladikavkaz

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