
Jobs Trump Environment As Armenia Opens Giant Copper Mine

by Mariam Harutunian
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Decried by activists as devastating for the environment, plans for an enormous copper mine near this mountain village in northern Armenia are nonetheless welcomed by local residents eager for jobs and escape from poverty.

The Teghut copper-molybdenum deposit, located in the Lori region near this ex-Soviet country's border with Georgia, was banned from being developed in the 1970s out of fear for the local environment.

But with copper prices soaring on international markets, Armenia's government recently approved plans to begin mining the deposit within the next three years.

The move sparked an outcry among environmentalists, who say open-pit operations at the mine will wreak havoc on the environment, wiping out swathes of virgin forest and decimating the local animal population.

But for those who live nearby, the prospect of saving their community from slow decline is pushing environmental concerns aside.

"My heart aches for our nature, but it aches more when I look at the conditions people live in. If new jobs aren't created here then within five years our villages will be devastated, there will be only old men," Teghut resident Gagik Gasparian said.

As in the rest of Armenia, thousands of local residents have left this region in recent years to look for jobs elsewhere, some in the capital Yerevan, others in Russia.

Armenia's economy is suffering under an economic embargo imposed by neighbouring Azerbaijan and Turkey over the country's support for ethnic Armenian separatists in the Azerbaijani region of Nagorny Karabakh.

Unemployment is high and more than 30 percent of Armenia's three million people live on less than two dollars (1.50 euros) a day.

The company opening the mine, Armenian Copper Program (ACP), headed by Russian-Armenian businessman Valery Medzhlumian, is promising 1,400 much-needed new jobs in the region. ACP also hopes the mine will contribute an extra three percent a year to the national economy.

The Teghut mine is estimated to contain 1.6 million tonnes of copper, which is widely used in plumbing and electrical wiring, and 99,000 tonnes of molybdenum, a silvery white element used in alloys to strengthen steel.

ACP was granted a 25-year license to exploit the mine in 2001 and Armenia's Ministry of Environmental Protection approved its development plans earlier this year.

Approval was given despite the company's intention to operate the mine as an open pit, which involves removing the entire upper layer of earth instead of the far more expensive method of digging tunnels

to reach ore.

Machinery will be used to smash through swathes of forests and environmentalists claim that 357 hectares of rich forest will be lost, including 128,000 trees.

"The ecological balance of the district will be broken," said Srбуhi Harutunian, the director of the Social-Environmental Association, a non-governmental organization.

According to environmental groups, dozens of plant and animal species will be under threat from the mine's operations, including 21 mammal, 11 fish and nine plant species that have been declared endangered.

"There will also be huge damage to the health of local residents.

They can suffer from allergies and pulmonary diseases because of the enormous quantities of dust produced," Harutunian said.

Activists also worry that architectural monuments in the region dating as far back as the Bronze Age, and also including early stone crosses and churches, could be damaged or destroyed.

The government insists everything will be done to minimize the mine's impact on the environment.

"All the questions of ecologists have been answered in the company's project through a series of actions that will reduce the damage to the environment, including large-scale works to restore tracts of forest," said Ashot Santrosian, the head of the environment ministry department that approved the project.

ACP director Gagik Azrumanian admitted the mine would cause serious damage to the environment, but described that as "a price that is necessary to pay for the economic development of the country."

"We understand that an unprecedented number of trees will be cut down," he said. "But this is necessary and people have to understand that there is no economic development, no such economic programme, that would not have a negative influence on the environment."

Environmentalists argue the price is too high and say the government should look instead at promoting the region as a tourist destination.

The Lori region is already home to large chemical plants and an enormous smelter doing significant damage to local forests and water sources, said Mger Sharoian, a spokesman for the Armenian Forests NGO.

"The development of the Teghut deposit will only aggravate the situation," he said. "We suggest developing eco-tourism in Lori, which has all the natural conditions -- virgin woods, pure springs, rivers, clean air and architectural monuments," he said.

Armenia has recently stepped up efforts to promote tourism, but the prospect of tourists flocking to its mountain landscapes is still a far off dream. For the people of Teghut, the copper mine is offering jobs and economic development now.

"We hope that when the mine starts operating, when the jobs arrive, our people will finally return to our village," Teghut Mayor Arutiun Meliksetian said.
