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Democracy Dies in Darkness

ARMENIA'S 'GOOD LIFE' LOST TO MISERY, DARKNESS, COLD

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By Margaret Shapiro

YEREVAN, ARMENIA -- In this city of cold, darkness and shortages, dogs have become so hungry that they travel in sullen packs attacking people. Families tear up floorboards and have stripped the city's parks -- even its botanical garden -- in a desperate search for firewood. People glumly set buckets under melting chunks of ice for drinking water for their children.

This former Soviet republic, where people prided themselves on how well they lived and where independence was greeted with overflowing optimism 17 months ago, has hurtled back into the pre-modern age. The disintegration became a freefall this week when Armenia's last source of energy -- a gas pipeline running through war-ravaged Georgia -- was blown up, leaving Armenia dark and frozen.

Telephones no longer work, almost all public transport has stopped, most hospitals are shut. At night, Armenia's streets are pitch black and ghostly silent, the province of animals, a few people scavenging firewood and occasional cars. Deprived of heat and hot water, people live in overcoats and hats, washing rarely. Like modern cave dwellers they live by dim candlelight, cooking foraged food over tiny flames. In most places even cold running water and flushing toilets don't work. With no radio or newspaper, news travels only by word of mouth.

"Welcome to hell," said a Western resident who recently watched in horror as a pack of dogs attacked a man crossing a street. "Everything has been reduced to primal needs. No one is talking or thinking about anything else."

People seem stunned by what has happened to their lives and their country. "We were one of the more civilized places," said Levon Karadjian, an Armenian Red Cross official. "I never imagined it would go down so far or so fast."

The collapse of the former Soviet empire into 15 independent nations has brought economic depression and hardship everywhere, from Russia's frigid far eastern outposts to the Europeanized Baltic cities to republics such as Tajikistan, Moldova and Georgia, beset by civil wars. But no republic seems to be faring worse than Armenia. This country of 3.8 million people, poor in resources, has been cut off by years of blockade by neighboring Azerbaijan, arising from the two countries' dispute over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia is supporting ethnic Armenians in the territory who are fighting Azerbaijan for independence.

Since before the blockade, Armenia has struggled with the effects of a massive 1988 earthquake that destroyed half of the country's industrial base and left many people camping in shacks. But the critical blow has been the embargo by Azerbaijan, an oil-rich republic that, under the Soviet Union, provided Armenia with most of its energy. RE-0041

Christian Armenia's historic tensions with its Muslim neighbors have left its borders with Turkey and Iran closed. Its only access to the outside world is over its border with embattled Georgia or with the unpredictable flights of its increasingly dilapidated airplanes.

"The situation we face today resembles more a disaster than an economic crisis," said Armenian Prime Minister Khosrov Harutyunian, whose office was one of the few places supplied with some electricity. As Harutyunian spoke the power went out and he and his aides scrambled in the nighttime darkness for matches to light a kerosene lamp.

For a year, the situation has been dire, with bread often rationed and electricity supplied for only a couple of hours each day. Last winter there was no heat, but people bundled up indoors and relied on electric radiators, stoves and electric water heaters for hot water to wash with.

"We adjusted. After a while you adjust to anything, and wait for things to get better," said an advisor to Harutyunian.

But the blockade tightened. Only seven key factories were allowed to stay open, leaving an estimated two-thirds or more of the population jobless. Food and other necessities had to be imported, at prices many could not afford. Schools closed.

Then, last week, the gas pipeline blew up and Armenia was plunged into frigid darkness.

At the Yerevan home of the Milkonian family, a tiny window, mostly obscured by coverings meant to hold out cold drafts, lets in some light -- but not enough to distinguish people or furniture even in the daytime.

Three children and their parents, Miriam and Robert, use a kerosene lamp to illuminate a tiny table for meals, but shut it off afterwards because a container of kerosene costs about about three month's salary. Robert, 37, has been out of work for a year and the family lives by selling possessions and by help from relatives and friends.

"If we had money I would go somewhere else, to Russia, to someplace with some heat, so that my children could live through this time," said Miriam, 37, who frets that her children have become very nervous.

The Milkonians turn on their small kerosene heater for about an hour a day to heat and to cook their food. Otherwise, they sit in the dark, bundled up, unable to read, play games, or even drink a warm cup of tea. Their room, like virtually every other place in the country, is so cold that every breath condenses into a cloud of steam. Once a week, Miriam heats up a small pot of water to wash her children, 11, 8 and 3 years old. The whole apartment, under the dim illumination of a visitor's flashlight, looks like it could use a good scrubbing, but Miriam said there is just no way she can do it.

"There's no air, there's no light. That's how we live. But to me that isn't life," said Miriam, who holds out hope that spring will bring some relief.

A nearby orphanage is equally grim. The 49 children, some only a few months old, are huddled under blankets, wearing hats for warmth, often two to a bed. Each room had a kerosene heater donated by foreigners as humanitarian aid, but was still frigid. Laundry -- including diapers -- was done by boiling a huge pot of water on a wood fire. Government money and goods have all but dried up, leaving these tiny children and their tenders to fend for themselves.

"We live on the kindness of people," said director Yelena Kasparian, who added wryly, "It'll get better -- though probably when we are no longer."

In the short term things will almost certainly get worse. While spring will bring warmer weather, it also will add new health problems. Many water and sewer pipes cracked when they froze this winter, so water supplies, already threatened by the shutdown of water filtration plants, will face serious pollution.

There already has been a surge in gastrointestinal disease, tuberculosis, viral hepatitis and measles. Medicines are in critically short supply while vaccines, donated by aid groups, can no longer be properly stored.

These extreme hardships, after the relative prosperity of the recent Soviet period, have left many people here longing for those more orderly and peaceful times. "There has never been a good period in Armenian history," said Robert Milkonian. "But under Soviet power it was better. A year ago, when we voted for independence, people didn't feel that way. Now they do."

Others, with money or relatives abroad, are simply opting out. Armenian Aeroflot flies overworked airplanes to Russia on an irregular schedule. Passengers pack into filthy, smelly cabins, some sitting in broken seats, others standing in the aisles.

"I need a rest," said one young man, a self-described business manager, heading for Moscow. How long a rest was he planning there? "Two years, and then I will see," he said.

Such pessimism is common. The government, which a year ago was a leader in the move to privatize and develop a market economy, now is consumed by infighting over the war with Azerbaijan and the fuel blockade.

The government has vowed to reopen a nuclear power plant closed for safety reasons after the 1988 earthquake if conditions do not improve, but that could take more than a year to accomplish and raises serious environmental and health concerns. Promises by Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze to release some emergency gas supplies to Armenia did little to lift the gloom over this once vibrant country.
