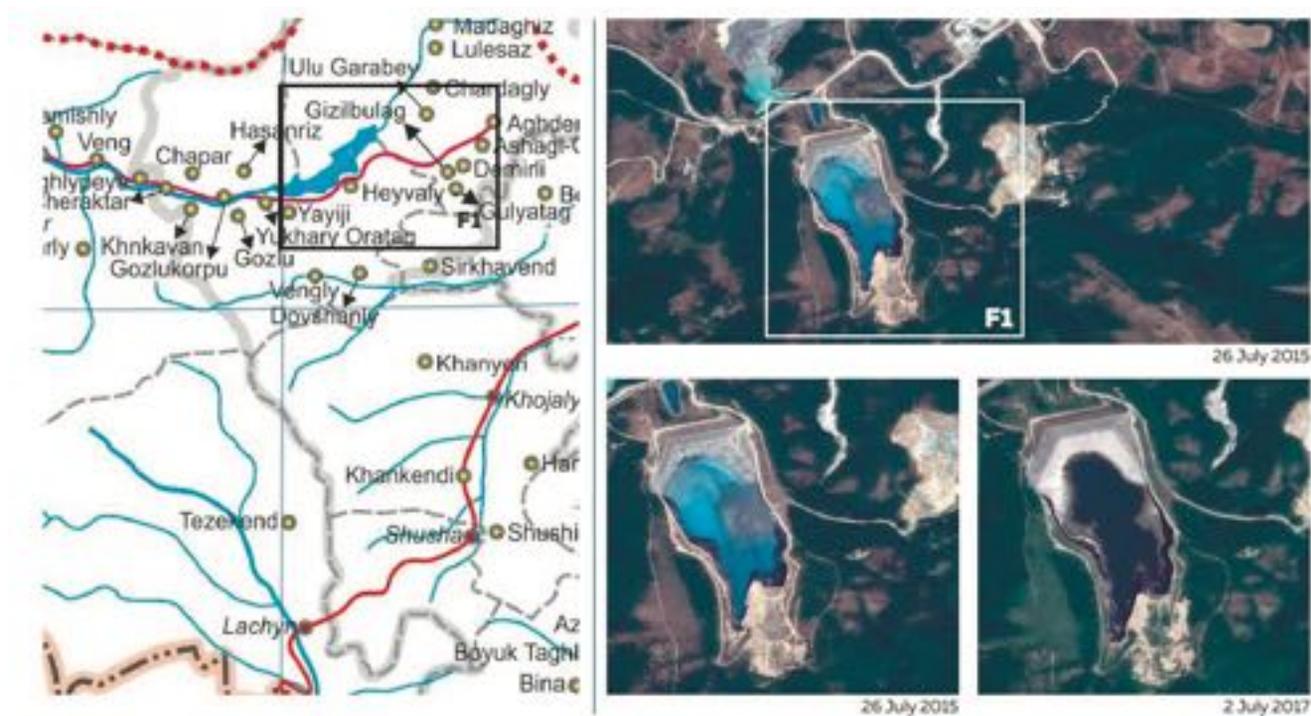


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UNDERSTANDING ARMENIA'S ENVIRONMENTAL TERROR AGAINST AZERBAIJAN

Environmental terrorism has long been used as a form of violence. Whilst the existence of a phenomenon of 'environmental terrorism' is questioned neither by politicians nor by scholars, it still lacks a clear formulation. It is important to shed light on this relatively new subset of terrorism before exploring the nature of the colossal damage to the ecosystem, wild-

life and natural resources in liberated territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan inflicted by Armenia during its illegal military occupation. The list of the damage caused by this occupation is quite long: extensive and systematic exploitation, pillaging and illicit trade of agricultural, water and mineral resources, depletion of water reservoirs, removal of rare species of trees, including rare



Dump caused by exploitation of Gyzilbulag underground copper-gold mine in Kalbajar. Azercosmos



Kalbajar district, Heyvaly village

Karabakh
Revival
Fund

and precious trees for timber, and other damage to the environment .

Along with 'environmental terrorism', other new concepts such as 'biological terrorism', 'ecoterrorism', and many others have been introduced into scholarly debates but there is still no internationally accepted interpretation of it. The concepts might be new and ambiguous, but the history of this dimension of terrorism precedes them. Elizabeth L. Chalecki distinguishes between environmental and eco-terrorism with the former one damaging natural resources, whilst the latter targets the built environment in defense of natural resources. However, for the purposes of this article the term 'environmental terrorism' as well as 'eco-terrorism' are used interchangeably both referring to deliberate destruction (or threat of destruction) of the environment, flora and fauna, natural resources of one country by another country, groups or individuals.

Environmental terrorism has specific features to be taken into account with regard to motivation, means, target, and enemy. It focuses on massive destruction of environmental resources among which particularly vulnerable are water, agriculture, minerals, and wildlife. There is a broad spectrum of methods its perpetration



Khojavand and Jabrayil districts

Karabakh
Revival
Fund

6 September 2018

10 September 2018



Gubadli district, Khanlig village

29 September 2002

30 September 2018

and it pursues specific goals. In general, environmental terror attacks target nature in order to undermine the political will and cause great economic and environmental damages. It is believed that terrorist groups

resort to environmental terrorism due to the fact that it requires much lower costs, can be perpetrated using only a few people, and while being simple to plan causes more extensive destruction than conventional terrorism.



Lachin district, Zabukh village

27 June 2010

21 July 2017

According to Daniel Schwartz, an act of environmental destruction can be termed as 'environmental terrorism' only when (1) the act or threat breaches national and/or international laws governing the disruption of the environment during peacetime or wartime and (2) the act or threat exhibits the fundamental characteristics of terrorism (i.e. has specific objectives and is aimed at a symbolic target).

While ecological sensitivity is increasing and public awareness of climate change is growing all over the world, terrorists still refer to different methods of environmental terrorism and there are precedents that show

continued targeting of the environment in order to achieve political goals. Unfortunately, while ecoterrorism remains in the forefront of international attention, the ambiguity of existing laws and definitions create loopholes for perpetrators to avoid responsibility for their crimes.

The former Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict began with Armenia's ungrounded territorial claims to Azerbaijani lands. As a result of the military aggression of Armenia against Azerbaijan in 1988-1994, over 20 percent of its internationally recognized territories were occupied by Armenia. The four UN Security Council resolutions of 1993 (822, 853, 874 and 884), demanding the immediate withdrawal of Armenian troops from the occupied Azerbaijani territories, had not been implemented up until the 44-day Patriotic War (27.10.2020-10.11.2020), when Azerbaijan, under the leadership of Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Azerbaijan, President Ilham Aliyev put an end to the Armenian occupation and restored its territorial integrity.

Armed conflicts are one of the most devastating experiences of mankind which have massive environmental impacts. Ecological damage in the liberated territories of Azerbaijan, including pollution, arson, deforestation, illegal exploitation of mineral deposits, etc. is the result of a policy of deliberate environmental terror committed by Armenia from the early days of its military occupation. The environmental costs may be of much greater importance for the future of the South Caucasus region and beyond.

The illegal exploitation of Azerbaijan's natural resources by Armenia has caused colossal damage to biodiversity: the Basitchay, Garagol, Gubadli, Dashalti, Arazboyu and Lachin State Nature Reserves were subject to environmental terror. Forests, including two-millennia-old plane trees, were destroyed, trees were cut down en masse and sold. Satellite imagery of the region obtained by



Azerbaijan's satellite operator "Azercosmos" provides a clear understanding of the environmental catastrophe in the liberated territories. According to "Azercosmos", over 54,000 hectares of forested areas were completely destroyed since 1988.

Another reprehensible fact is that the exploitation and pillage of natural resources and other wealth in the formerly occupied territories of Azerbaijan was a lucrative business for Armenia and the puppet separatist regime it had established in those territories. Furthermore, the involvement of foreign companies in the formerly occupied territories of Azerbaijan is also well-evidenced. Regretfully, the illegal production of different



Ruined cities and villages – this is the state in which the Azerbaijani army found the lands liberated from Armenian aggressors



materials, including those made of wood, developed on these lands with the participation of foreign companies which pursued predatory practices and paid no heed to the environment. Along with Armenia, foreign companies also illegally exploited Azerbaijan's natural resources in the formerly occupied territories and participated in the illegal cultivation of land in these areas. Valuable species of trees, including nut-trees, oaks, Eldar's pines and others that are under special protection were subjected to cutting for timber and exportation from these territories for furniture, barrel and rifle production.

Hundreds of fields of ore, non-metallic, construction and building materials, underground freshwater, and thermal-mineral water deposits in the territories of Kalbajar, Lachin, Gubadli, Jabrayil, and Zangilan districts were heavily damaged by the illegal and large-scale exploitation by Armenia. Around 163 mineral deposits were exploited without any regard for environmental implications, including the Soyudlu and Vejneli gold deposits, the Gyzybulag gold and copper fields, the Damirli porphyry copper (molybdenum) deposit, etc. The exploitation of natural resources was accompanied by associated ecological disasters. As a result of the predatory mining, numerous contaminated toxic waste products saturated with heavy metals and other dangerous substances were left deposited without any treatment in structurally unsafe tailings.

The famous thermo-mineral waters of Tutgun and Istisu, particularly notable for their favorable gas and chemical composition, high temperature and large natural resources, were destroyed and looted. Seven relict lakes of ecological significance in the liberated territories of Azerbaijan were severely affected by anthropogenic impacts.

Another clear manifestation of environmental terror was the intentional blocking by Armenia of the flow of the Tartar River. Armenia cut off river flow in summer, leaving hundreds of thousands of hectares of land without water supply, and unblocked it in winter on purpose to create flooding. Similarly, Armenia manipulated the water of the Sarsang reservoir.

During the April battles in 2016 and the 44 days of the Patriotic War in 2020, Armenia actively used banned phosphorus munitions, which, along with human casualties, created challenges to the environment in the region. Poisonous discharge into water has been the source of a massive fish die off in the Araz River. Unexploded phosphorus projectiles were identified and decommissioned by Azerbaijan with the participation of OSCE representatives and military attaches. Using phosphorus munitions, Armenia set Shusha forests on fire. With regard to this crime, Armenia has been circulating false and distorted information, accusing Azerbaijan of using incendiary weapons, which

During Armenian occupation, the forests and rivers of Karabakh suffered colossal damage



is nothing but blame-shifting and a tactic of evading responsibility.

Environmental degradation in the formerly occupied territories has reached such an alarming level that even Armenian-based environmental organizations have expressed their concern. Nevertheless, Armenia has continued to commit environmental crimes, including those during the handover of Kalbajar district to Azerbaijan, which, upon Armenia's request, Azerbaijan agreed to delay. Armenians showed unmatched savagery to the entire world by setting fire to settlements, cutting down trees and burning forests. The unprecedented burning of beehives by the withdrawing occupying forces is an act of environmental terrorism harmful to the entire region.

Unfortunately, there is still an urgent need to stop the continuing environmental damage to the region. Armenia's Gajaran copper-molybdenum plant and the Gafan ore refinery are contaminating the western tributary of the Araz River, the Okhchuchay River (a trans-boundary river shared with Armenia) that eventually flows into the Caspian Sea via the Kura River. This pollution can have detrimental consequences for millions of people, as well as the fauna and flora of the entire region.

Azerbaijan has always been open to ground-based environmental and technical assessments and sought to draw international attention to the rapid deteriora-

tion of the ecological situation in the formerly occupied regions. In response to the proposal of Azerbaijan, UN General Assembly's resolution entitled "The situation in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan" (2006) stressed the necessity of urgently conducting an environmental operation and called for an assessment of the short- and long-term effects of the fires on the environment of the region and measures for its rehabilitation. In 2006, an OSCE fact-finding mission documented the first series of massive wildfires in the eastern part of the then occupied Azerbaijani territories. Resolution 2085 (2016) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe deplored "the fact that the occupation by Armenia of Nagorno-Karabakh and other adjacent areas of Azerbaijan creates... humanitarian and environmental problems for the citizens of Azerbaijan living in the Lower Karabakh valley."

When speaking about the reaction of international media to Armenia's environmental terror against Azerbaijan, the international media (Western in particular) refrained from mentioning the perpetrator and the fact that the above-mentioned acts of terror were part of Armenia's deliberate strategy of environmental terrorism as a result of which thousands hectares of forests and the unique ecosystem are now facing the threat of extinction. Azerbaijan has repeatedly addressed international community on the subject of environmental

Azerbaijani ecologist takes water samples in the Okhchu-chay river to determine the degree of pollution. 2021 photo



damage and presented the facts of aggression against nature to international organizations. The observations demonstrate an alarming rate of deforestation, including the areas with endangered tree species. No reaction at all or feedback with general wording were received from international organizations. It goes without saying that the environmental threats are not confined only to these territories, but also threaten the region on a wider scale.

After the second Karabakh war, Azerbaijan, along with the demining process, initiated large-scale rehabilitation and reconstruction work, which will contribute to establishing the necessary infrastructure, as well as the restoration of ecological balance in the liberated territories. The first “smart village” project has already been launched in Zangilan district. There are also plans to restore cultivated areas, develop crop production, fruit growing and animal husbandry in order to ensure a “Great Return” of former IDPs to their native lands. This gradual process envisages the first group of former IDPs to be settled in Zangilan and then in pilot villages of Aghdam, Jabrayil, Fuzuli and Khojavand districts.

On 24 November 2020, the Coordination Headquarters was created by an order of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan to facilitate a centralized solution of issues in the liberated territories. A Working Group on Environmental Issues of the Interdepartmental Center under the Coordination Headquarters was established to supervise the progress of work on the revision of the

geological maps of the liberated territories, the reassessment of the balance of mineral resources according to the stock data, audits and monitoring on deposits plundered by Armenia and an assessment of the caused damage.

Agricultural activities have already begun with winter crops sown on an area of more than 7,000 hectares. Residents of Kalbajar and Lachin districts engaged in beekeeping and animal husbandry are supported by the government via specially tailored pilot projects.

In order to increase and protect forest areas, a “Program for the restoration of the forest fund in 2022-2026” has been prepared.

The program envisages reforestation of about 30,000 hectares of forest fund in the Karabakh and East Zangazur economic regions. The big advantage is that the soil and climate conditions of Karabakh are conducive to the establishment of new forest belts. Within the framework of large-scale afforestation measures in lands cleared of mines, a total of 20,000 tree seedlings, as well as about 2 tons of oak and eastern plane seeds, have been planted in Zangilan, Gubadli, Fuzuli, Aghdam, Jabrayil, Shusha, Kalbajar, Lachin and Khojavand districts since the beginning of 2021. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva planted trees in the Central City Park to be built in, as well as the Jidir Duzu plain and the Basitchay reserve. Fish were released into the Basitchay. Together with the Turkish Ministry of Agriculture, a “Friendship Forest” on an area of 20 hectares will be laid around the city of Jabrayil.

The liberated areas have been declared by President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev a green energy zone: a 240-megawatt solar power plant funded by BP will be built in Jabrayil and Zangilan districts, which are ahead in terms of the number of sunny days.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the international community is gradually moving towards a general awareness of how elements of the global ecosystem are closely interconnected, and it is hoped that countries will come to consensus on the problematic of environmental terrorism which impacts (sometimes irrevocably) their societies at local, regional and inter-

Protected forests of Karabakh cut down during the Armenian occupation. 2021 photo



national levels. Countering environmental terrorism requires an understanding of the nature of the threat and formulation of appropriate and effective responses. While Azerbaijan is taking important measures to restore the environmental balance, the full environmental rehabilitation of the damage caused will take years. It is vital to carry out a thorough investigation and in-situ environmental and technical assessment of the damages inflicted to the region by Armenian occupation, and reinforce the legal mechanisms to bring those responsible for these international environmental crimes to justice. Undoubtedly, any breach of international legal provisions, including the destruction of the environment and pillage of natural resources, represents a war crime and should be subject to criminal liability. Both Armenia and the foreign companies involved must be held accountable for their violation of international environmental law in all instances. ✿

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