

## Focus 9 Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia: chaos and survival

### Pensioners poverty

From the Tbilisi warehouse run by the Federation and the Georgian Red Cross Society, a trip out with one of the trucks delivering food parcels to those in need confronts the reality of the staggering changes that may be making entire populations vulnerable, and the challenges faced by agencies trying to help.

Supplied by ECHO - the European Community Humanitarian Office - each parcel is 20 kg of balanced diet in a box, with rice or pasta, tinned meat or fish, beans, oil, sugar and other items, designed to help keep one person alive for a month or contribute to a family's survival. With contents that can vary depending on needs and supplies, some parcels were pre-packed before being sent to Georgia by air because of the sudden growing needs as winter approached, making them some of the most expensive food in the world. To make money go further, bulk food is now being brought in by sea and road, and parcels are packed in-country.

First stop, in the old quarter, and with his government-provided list in hand, the driver's mate carries the box up the darkened stairwell of an old and cold building to the fourth floor, only to find that the pensioner is out queuing for bread. The delivery truck will try again another day, as the parcel cannot be left with a neighbour, not merely because it is worth a great deal of money in the nearest market, but also because the delivery of every parcel, every tin of meat and bag of rice, is monitored; each box requires the production of a passport or identity papers, completion of a special form, and the recipient's signature.

The next stop is more successful: up a steep hill in the shadow of a magnificent church, Makruhi

Termanasian Garegin, aged 72, lives alone in her own house, so pays nothing for two chilly rooms in a wooden courtyard block, sharing a cold water tap in the yard and an outside lavatory 30 shuffling and unsteady metres along the balcony.

She never married, she says, and after working all her life in the printing industry retired to look after her sick brother before he died three years ago. Her monthly pension of a few thousand "coupons" is almost worthless; devalued every day by inflation, it is just enough for bread when she feels strong enough to make the long walk, but not for cabbage or onions. A stringy tomato plant struggles to grow in a bowl on the balcony, but she has been unable to buy any fruit or vegetables for months, has no food stocks beyond her monthly parcel and estimates her entire savings as 500 coupons. Despite frequent falls and growing blindness, she has not seen a doctor in a year - even if the doctor did not charge, she could not afford to buy the medicine he might prescribe.

Do the people living round the courtyard help each other? Thin and frail, she replies: "The people living here do try to look after each other, but everyone is so badly off, it is not possible for me to ask for help. It is very bad to be alone."

The last stop of the day shows something of the support structures and subsidies that the Soviet State once provided, and which Georgia will be unable to afford to maintain in the future. Anastasia Borisova, aged 66, lives in a 20-storey high-rise block half-an-hour's drive south of Tbilisi. Today she is tearful and in pain, having fallen and broken her right arm the day before, but she brightens a little at the sight of the parcel and explains she is lucky to live on the first floor and to have kind neighbours who helped her get to the polyclinic.

Married at 20 and then divorced without children, she moved to the flat four years ago after 24 years on a waiting list and 40 years working in a clothes factory in Tbilisi. The flat is small but bright and warm, with a bedroom, bathroom and kitchen, and a balcony which has been enclosed with wood and plastic to save heat and make another small room. From her 9,000-coupon pension, just raised from 4,900, she pays only 19 coupons a month for the flat and a cold water supply, 58 more for hot water, 130 for a gas supply and 20 for electric light.

But the flat is almost empty, as she has sold most possessions except her bed and some crockery and cutlery to buy food. To be at the head of the bread queue, she starts out at 4 a.m. and can wait in vain all day. Bread is all she has eaten for at least four months, as potatoes are now 10,000 coupons a kilogram and other fruits and vegetables even more expensive. As the crisis gets worse, how will she survive? Despite a shrug of the shoulders, the bitterness is clear: "In the past it was better, there was food in the shops at prices we could afford. Then we had everything, now we have nothing."

### Simple surveillance

As the economic and political situation in Armenia undermines the effectiveness of State information collection systems, a project by Armenian and American agencies has been started to collect, monitor and interpret epidemiological and other basic data. The project is an example of the way in which - in situations where national surveillance is not possible - even limited surveys and studies can provide governments, local authorities, communities and national and international disaster-response agencies with information for programmes to reduce



*They may be counted in million, move hundreds of miles, stay for months or years, consume tonnes of food, and be the subject of calculations, budget lines and resolutions, but refugees are not just numbers. A factory worker, a farmer, a mother: ordinary people getting on with life, suddenly caught in the middle of a war and a collapsing economy. Crises they did little to make but do a lot to counteract.*  
Azerbaijan, 1994. Ian Berry/Magnum

vulnerability and target assistance among those people in greatest need.

The programme has shown how some of the health gains of previous years were being lost, including the reappearance of diseases such as typhus, while vulnerable groups, such as pensioners, were hungry and getting hungrier. Birth rate per 1,000 population has fallen from 24.1 in 1985 to 19.3 in 1992; crude mortality per 1,000 population has gone up from 5.8 in 1985 to 6.9 in 1992; thus population growth rate has fallen from 18 per 1,000 in 1985 to 12 per 1,000 in 1992.

Perhaps reflecting the stress on society, together with the temporary or permanent emigration of Armenians, the number of divorces went up from 2,298 in 1991

to 2,696 in 1992, while the number of marriages fell from 57,908 in 1991 to 19,019. Studies by EPHIS of disease outbreaks showed in 1993 a number of outbreaks of various diarrhoeal diseases related to breakdowns in urban water supply, which may be linked to financial problems, intermittent electricity supplies for pumps, and shortages of chlorine. Cases of measles were increasing, perhaps as a result of breakdowns in vaccine supply or cold chains.

In the 1960s and 1970s, reported typhus cases fell from a peak of more than 50 a year to none in 1972. Then, in 1993, after 20-years typhus-free, six cases were confirmed in Armenia in April-May among staff and patients at a mental health hospital. This was the result of lice infestation

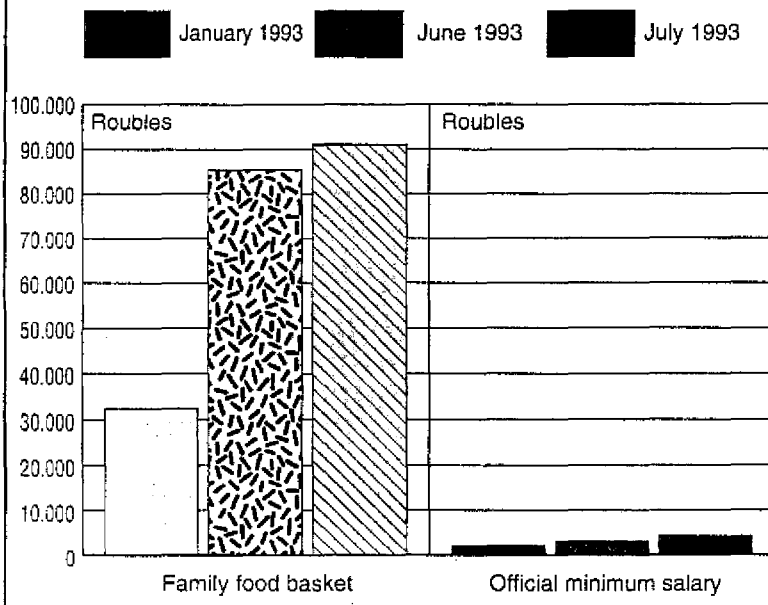
prompted by lack of water or electricity to allow patient bathing, washing of clothes and sheets, and other hygiene controls. One very useful set of statistics collated by EPHISS has been a range of market indicators: prices of various foods and thus the cost of a balanced family "food basket", the cost of petrol, the official minimum monthly salary, and the rouble/dollar exchange rate. These show soaring inflation during 1993, clearly outstripping the minimum wage, confirming all the reports of the declining quality and quantity of food intake by the vast majority of the population.

The needs and problems of one major vulnerable group - pensioners - have been analysed in greater detail, with a monthly surveillance of 100 people using weighing machines and tape measures to establish a body mass index (BMI = weight/the square of the height), as well as questionnaires about diet, eating habits and food stocks. These suggested that almost all pensioners do not have enough money to buy the food they need, and the proportion affected by this has gone up from 86% in December 1992 to 98% in July 1993; 67% were eating two meals a day, and 59% had only 1-6 days of food stocks in their homes.

This type of surveillance is also able to distinguish theory from reality: in June 1993, all pensions were officially due to go up 1,200 roubles, from 3,000 roubles (worth

### Food prices in the Caucasus

	January 1993		June 1993		July 1993	
	Roubles	US\$	Roubles	US\$	Roubles	US\$
Family food basket	32,400	62.9	85,312	71.7	91,062	91.1
Official minimum salary	2,000	3.9	3,000	2.5	4,200	4.2



*By mid-1993 the cost of the family food basket exceeded the official minimum wage in Armenia by some 2,100%. This hyper-inflation is reflected across the region and graphically illustrates the devastating economic crisis the area is facing.*

Source: Emergency Public Health Information System. Armenian National Institute of Health. 1993

US\$2.5) to 4,200 roubles (US\$4.2) a month; but the pensioner survey showed that most had not actually received the increase: the average pensioner's income rose just 67 roubles, from 3,594 roubles (US\$3) to 3,661 roubles (US\$3.7).

## Refugees in tents

Azerbaijan is crowded with as many as 750,000 displaced people and refugees. Many have made their own arrangements for accommodation, moving in with friends, relatives or simply people generously opening their homes to those in need and forced to flee by conflict. Many thousands live in empty apartments, schools and other public buildings. Communal buildings have limited sanitation, most are not as well-insulated as normal homes, and are not designed for families.

Although the people displaced by fighting have frequently been forced to abandon homes and possessions, as Azeri citizens, they do have one important advantage over many refugees: they have full rights in their own country, from food rations to access to health care.

In the south of Azerbaijan are some of the most recent victims of war in the Caucasus. Numbered rows of greying tents, each with a Red Crescent symbol, and sur-

rounded by fields of trampled mud, are the most visible signs of Azerbaijan's crisis of war, displaced families and growing hunger. Lined up along the road to the Iranian border, the tents are home to thousands of Azeris forced to flee within hours as conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh engulfed their families and farming communities in the Fizuli area of southern Azerbaijan.

Some - the lucky ones - escaped early by road across the bridges over the river border to Iran in trucks and cars piled high with their possessions. Others even brought their flocks of sheep and goats. The last to leave took only the clothes they wore and ran from the gunfire to the Aracs river; a scattering of bodies found downstream testified to the river's cold power.

With the help of the Iranian government and the Iranian Red Crescent Society, more than 50,000 cold and frightened people were able to travel 100 km north-east back into safe Azeri territory around the town of Imishli.

Despite the efforts of local people and neighbouring councils, backed up by agencies such as UNHCR, Médecins Sans Frontières, Oxfam and the combined help of the Federation delegation and the Azerbaijan Red Crescent Society, not all the sudden influx

could be found homes in public buildings.

The Iranian Red Crescent Society immediately followed up its earlier assistance by setting up camps for more than 10,000 people, distributing food and fuel, and providing medical care. Other camps are organised by the Turkish Red Crescent Society and Saudi-supported relief organisations. By comparison with permanent structures, even the best tent does little to reduce people's vulnerability, be it in health because of the weather, interrupted food supplies, sanitation and stress, or broader issues of security and self-sufficiency through land or employment.

As temperatures fell with the approaching winter, a canvas refuge two hours drive from the front line was clearly the last option for shelter when nothing else could be found, but many were grateful for that. Breaking off from baking traditional flat bread over an open fire, Gamza Alieva, aged 40, said: "Tents are not the best solution; we need more plastic covers to keep out the rain, and it is hard to find wood for bread-making. We've lost a lot, but here we do have food to eat and kerosene to keep the tents warm." She shrugged: "I don't know what will happen. I hope we can go back."