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H2-Oh: Condition of water network leaves residents wondering what they are drinking

By Julia Hakobyan

ArmeniaNow reporter

Hundreds of residents in the town of Aparan fell ill after drinking water became contaminated with sewage.

Victims suffered various stomach ailments and 31 of the most seriously affected people living in the town's Baghramyan Street, where the contamination happened, were taken to hospital with dysentery.

{ai194301.jpg|left} Liana Torosyan from the State Hygienic and Epidemiological Inspection of the Ministry of Health said that the outbreak was now in decline. Only one person remains in hospital and is expected to return home this week.

Officials in Aparan are continuing to urge residents to boil water before using it. Gor Abrahamyan, the Mayor of Aparan, says that the crumbling network of water pipes was to blame for the leak, claiming the Yerevan Water and Sewage Company must take responsibility.

"The company says that the outbreak was the result of improper central heating work. But the pipes have not been renovated for 40 years. A similar outbreak happened in 1997, when sewage and drinking water became mixed, and there was no central heating in the buildings at that time," he said.

Officials from the Yerevan Water and Sewage Company agree that the old iron pipes should be renewed but insist that the cause of this particular incident was incorrect installation of heating systems.

"Now a team is working at the damaged spot and 300 meters of pipes will be replaced by modern polyethylene pipes," says spokesman Malkhasyan.

Malkhasyan says the company will present a schedule of works for 2007 to the public by the end of this month. International organizations also have programs to help renovate Armenia's water pipes.

The World Bank will allocate 240 million dram (\$600,000) for restoration of pipes in Aragatsotn, while USAID and the UNDP will release \$320,000 to repair reservoirs and the drinking water system in Syunik.

The incident in Aparan is far from an isolated case of contamination of drinking water in Armenia. A similar incident in Yerevan three years ago resulted in 200 people being treated in hospital for dysentery. Officials blamed heavy rain for the contamination and none of the residents received compensation.

{ai194302.jpg|right} Drinking water in Armenia is collected in nine reservoirs from springs throughout the country, and then channeled to apartments. The residential charge for water rose again last year from 54 to 90 dram (24 US cents), and officials justified the increase by saying that investment funds were needed to renovate the pipe network.

Armenia has about one thousand kilometers of water pipes (NOT MORE?) and the whole network must be renovated if residents are to be protected from contamination. The system installed 50-60 years ago intersects with the sewage network at several points, and the possibility of contamination from leaks in rusty pipes remains high.

In the meantime, health officials say the only true way to ensure clean water is to hyper-chlorinate it. Officially water in Armenia contains 0.3 per cent chlorine at present, half the permissible standards of the World Health Organization.

Even so, water in Yerevan tastes and smells bad at times. The era when the capital's cool and pure water was glorified in songs and poems already seems a fading memory.