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Azerbaijan: Sumgayit Becomes One Of World's Most-Polluted Cities

By [Shahnaz Huseynova](#)



Garbage on Sumgayit's seashore (RFE/RL)

SUMGAYIT, September 18, 2007 (RFE/RL) -- On a slight incline, overgrown with grass and weeds, the graves -- some of them a simple headstone, others fenced-off and garnished with flowers -- seem to face away from the chimneys on the horizon.

A visit to Sumgayit's children's cemetery is a gloomy reminder of the high percentage of the city's children born with birth defects.

Sumgayit, a city about 30 kilometers northwest of Baku on the Caspian coast, has made it onto a list of the world's top 10 most-polluted places. The list is published by the Blacksmith Institute, a New York-based environmental health NGO.

As many as 275,000 people have potentially been affected by heavy metal and chemical contamination in the city, once one of the jewels of Soviet heavy industry.

The air has a dense, chemical smell, and the skyline is dotted with massive smokestacks billowing gray smoke out over the city.

"The smell of gas wakes me up. I get headaches, I feel nauseous, it affects my nerves," one pensioner says.

"Even if it's polluted, what can we do? We're going back to the old days. We can feel the bad air, smell the bad air, the city stinks after 6 o'clock," says another local resident.

Industrial Scars

The city, whose prime industry in Soviet days was the production of industrial and agricultural chemicals, once had one of the highest rates of infant mortality and cancer in the USSR.

According to a study jointly commissioned by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Azerbaijani Health Ministry, and the University of Alberta, cancer rates are 22-51 percent higher than the Azerbaijani average.

Today, the majority of the factories have been closed down. **"The smell of gas wakes me up. I get headaches, I feel nauseous, it affects my nerves."**

But the city still bears the scars of its industrial past -- with heavy metal, oil, and chemical contamination.

Sumgayit is not just notorious for its pollution. In 1988, as nationalist sentiments rose in the ailing Soviet Union, violence flared up between ethnic Azeris and ethnic Armenians in the city. As a result, the Armenian population fled the city.

The violence marked one of the early incidents that resulted in the war between Armenian and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. The war ended in 1994, and many ethnic Azeri refugees from Karabakh have since settled in Sumgayit.

Clean Up

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The Azerbaijani government says the ecological situation in Sumgayit has improved.

Mamed Mamedov, a senior official from the Ecology and Natural Resources Ministry, says the state of affairs is vastly better than when the city's industrial production was at its peak.



Children's graveyard in Sumgayit (RFE/RL)

"Sumgayit is not the same Sumgayit that it was in the 1990s. The factories are not working at the same level that they used to. Only 10 or 15 percent of them are operational, and that means there are fewer emissions," Mamedov says.

"We are not talking just about heavy emissions. The factories that used to work here used to pollute the atmosphere and the water a thousand times more. Today, you

can't even compare [the situation]."

The ministry says it is continuing to clean up the city. According to statistics, in the 1990s, Sumgayit industries produced 600 million cubic meters of polluted water every year. Today, the ministry says, that figure is closer to 80-100 million cubic meters.

In recent years, the government has said it has cleaned up 40,000 tons of polluted waste with the help of the World Bank in the vicinity of a local aluminum factory. However, four times that amount still remains in the surrounding area.

Oil Boom

And the new worry for many Sumgayit residents is that, with Azerbaijan's oil boom reviving the country's chemical industry, things will only get worse once again.

Local resident Fikret Gurbanov says that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the air in Sumgayit got cleaner.

"But lately the chemical factories have started operating again, and the air is getting worse," Gurbanov says. "Factories making large-diameter pipes release a lot of gas into the air with chemicals in it. Every day, we can smell it in the city."

And there doesn't seem to be much respite in sight.

Ecology and Natural Resources Minister Guseyngulu Bagirov says that he can't shut down the factories.

"I can't even shut down one of the brickworks. I don't have that authority. The best that we can do is take them to court," Bagirov says.

For now, the residents of Sumgayit seem resigned to living with their city's pollution. They live with the frustration that many of their beaches are too dirty to visit; and they can only hope that the pollution will not spread to the water system.

Four cities in the former Soviet Union appear in Blacksmith's top 10. The others are Chornobyl in Ukraine, and Dzerzinsk and Norilsk in Russia.

There's a song from Soviet times, which honors Sumgayit.

"The land is being revived inch by inch," the song boasts. "Oh, Sumgayit, everyone is talking about your glory, Azerbaijan is proud of you."

(Kenan Aliyev and Luke Allnut contributed to this report.)

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