



Հայաստանի Հանրապետության Հիմնադրամ  
The Armenia Fund



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Rural Development Program

DATE: 8 May, 2008  
FROM: RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION OFFICE  
SUBJECT: WEEKLY UPDATE OF THE ARMENIA FUND RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

After a week coinciding with the international proletarian holiday of May 1, which we naturally (and thoroughly) honored, we are back to invite you to a journey to Meghri, the northernmost point of Armenia bordering Iran. We made this two day trip to gather first hand information on the situation and needs in three border villages of Shvanidzor, Alvank and Nrnadzor. We were joined by the representatives of Iranian Armenian community who are willing to reach out to their compatriots on the other side of the border. Also joining us was Armen Ekserciyan, a benefactor from Argentine who has taken on the challenge of breathing a new life into the community of Ditavan in Tavush and is in Armenia to discuss the priorities and the long term development strategy for this border village.

### **THERE AND BACK AGAIN**

Meghri is located around 500km away from Yerevan (by Armenian standards that's very, very far) so we had to set out at 6AM (which by Armenian standards is very, very early) to be able to get there and still have time to get things done before a more comprehensive village to village visit on the next day with the Iranian Armenian community representatives. The weather on the way was...well, see it for yourself...





...An hour later...



...and another hour later...





An infinity later (6 hours) a child runs by through the mist and only then do we discover that we have finally reached Meghri.



After making all the necessary arrangements for the meetings with mayors of the villages and the community members on the next day we headed back to Meghri and our old good Soviet era hotel complete with tropical wallpapers and a shower system from hell. The (very) cold night was redeemed by a welcoming breakfast.





After meeting the members of the Iranian Armenian community, we headed to the first village on our list – Alvank, a border community of 421 on the bank of river Araks. Since 1988, the village is mostly populated by refugees. During the meeting, the mayor of the village presented the biggest challenge that the community faces today, a challenge it shares with all the neighboring communities - the drinking water issue. The community members have to rely on ancient water collection reservoirs (known as kahriz), which tend to dry out during hot summer months.



After the meeting, we were given a short tour of the village. One item especially attracted our attention. We'll let you guess what it is (if you don't, the correct answer is in the end of the report...).





The next stop was the community of Shvanidzor. It is the oldest (and the most beautiful) village in the region dating back to the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. The community members cherish their historic heritage and the mayor (who turned out to be a talented tour guide) gave us a quick overview of the impressive past of the village which still preserves some of its previous grandeur in hillside mansions like this.



Talking about the issues of the community, the main problem was once again the drinking water issue. Tackling this problem is complicated by shortage of fresh water springs in the vicinity of the community. This is a major issue and one that directly and painfully affects the life of the people especially during the summer months.





To get to the last stop of our journey, the village of Nrnadzor, we had to pass through the narrowest road and hands down most dangerous road we had ever seen. The uneven serpentine of this road hangs above the gorge with Araks humming threateningly from beneath (no safety barriers, naturally).



A kilometer into this road, we had to make the same journey in reverse because the road was too narrow for us and this greatest achievement of Soviet machinery.





When we finally arrived in Nrnadzor, the condition of the community astonished us all. The most accurate words to describe today's situation in the village is devastation.



This community of 150 is mostly growing pomegranates, which is then purchased by one of the major processing plants. This ensures the community members some income but does not solve the gravest issue of absolute lack of drinking water in the community. Where the previous two villages could at least get enough water from their springs and water reservoirs for their daily needs in the hot and dry summer months, the people of Nrnadzor have nothing.

The mayor of the community has tried to solve the issue by bringing in water via pumps that supplied the community with at least a minimum of required water. This proved to be only a temporary remedy as the hygienic service officials of the region declared the water source anti sanitary and the community had to stop using it. Sometimes, a truck carrying cistern of water visits the community but obviously, it does little to alleviate the situation. With no dependable source of drinking water, life is harsh for the people of Nrnadzor. Many families are forced to leave and look for a better life elsewhere. Two families have already left the community and two more are getting ready to leave by the end of this month. It is obvious that if people



of Nrnadzor do not receive help and receive it soon, in a couple of years this strategically important village will be completely abandoned.

However critical the situation and however serious the issue, there is still hope and we believe that by combining the efforts of all the people who care and want to help, we can bring the much needed relief and restore the belief of people of Nrnadzor in a brighter tomorrow, a day when at least this problem will be history.



*(The strange aggregate in Alvank was a homemade vodka distiller. Naturally, we were treated to a near 100% strong nuclear device which the villagers lovingly called grape juice.)*