
Azeri residents fight eviction by oil company.

Thousands of unregistered homes at risk as oil firm seeks to reclaim land.

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Late last month, desperate scenes were enacted in a small settlement outside Baku. Two well-built young men pulled a sobbing, pregnant woman and her two small children out of a one-bedroom house scheduled for demolition.

The settlement of Upper Sulu-tep, near the village of Khodjasan, is just 15 kilometres from the centre of the Azerbaijani capital Baku. At the height of summer, it is an arid spot, with no grass growing or trees visible.

But now there are four huge oil wells, each with a wide black, treacly pit next to it. Everywhere, there is the stink of oil and gas.

For a month now, the Binagadi Oil company has been demolishing houses here, sometimes with the help of the regional authorities and the police. They are all on land on which Binagadi Oil is working, and almost all the residential buildings here were built without the required permits. The majority of the people who live nearby are either from the poorest sections of society or refugees.

Almost a month has gone by since the demolition work started. More than 200 homes have already been knocked down.

Local resident Adalat Seidov estimates that there are between ten and fifteen thousand houses in the area inhabited by as many as 60,000 people, all of which could be potentially affected by the oil company's campaign.

Desperate residents say they have nowhere else to go.

"Where am I supposed to take my family? Whose door will I knock on?" asked Nizami Bagirov, who comes from the Lerik district in southern Azerbaijan on the border with Iran.

Bagirov says that he fought in the Nagorny Karabakh war and then used to earn a small income doing hard physical work in a nearby stone quarry. A few years ago, he decided to build a house for himself, his wife and two small daughters.

"One of my colleagues lives in Sulu-tep," said Bagirov. "He suggested I build a one-bedroom house there. We found an empty plot of land and built a house for me."

However, he has now lost his home on the grounds that he had no formal permission to build it.

Lawyer Fuad Agayev says Bagirov's rights have been abused. "Regardless of whether a house has been built illegally or not, to destroy it you need a court order," he said, adding that the oil company had no right to demolish houses themselves and the court should also provide Bagirov and his family with temporary accommodation.

The authorities declined to give IWPR any precise information about the demolitions.

Binagadi Oil, which owns the land, used to be part of the state oil company SOCAR. Anar Gurbanov, a lawyer for the firm, said it is drilling for oil on land in four fields, but three of them had been taken over illegally. He said they were losing substantial sums as a result.

Gurbanov admitted that authorisation from a court was necessary in order to destroy buildings and insisted that the company sought such orders for demolitions. However, he was unable to provide evidence of any such paperwork, and some residents said they'd received official notification to vacate their houses, not from a court but the authorities and Binagadi Oil.

One resident fighting eviction is Khavyar Jafarova, a refugee from Zangelan region, which is now under Armenian occupation. "They only gave us a verbal warning, we haven't seen any paper work. I have lived here for twelve years - the authorities should give me back my house in Zangelan. Even though I'm a woman, I fought for my country. I will fight to the last here too," she said.

"I have lived here for seven years, and I have all the paperwork," objected Khumar Velieva, a refugee from Armenia. "I bought the land from the municipality, and the construction was approved by the regional authorities."

The head of administration of the village of Khojasan said the land was only leased to Velieva for temporary use.

Unauthorised house building in the greater Baku area is a widespread phenomenon, as the population of the largest city in the Caucasus continues to grow.

According to a presidential decree, a census will be carried out in Azerbaijan in 2009. An anonymous source in the cabinet of ministers told IWPR that it will be conducted not according to place of registration but to where people are actually living at the time.

The source adds that before the census takes place, the government wants to solve the problem of residents living in homes built illegally in Baku and surrounding areas. Many unauthorised houses will be demolished and others will be legalised.

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