

Thirty Years On, Armenian Earthquake Survivors Still Waiting to Be Rehoused

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Cover Image Attribute: Eighty-seven-year-old Karmen and eighty-one-year-old Gayane / © Klaus Richter

Thirty Years On, the Victims of the Most Devastating Earthquake Ever to Strike in the Former-Soviet Union are Still Waiting to Be Rehoused

Story and images by Stephen M. Bland and Klaus Richter

On December 7th, 1988, an earthquake with a magnitude of 6.8 struck near the Armenian town of Spitak, destroying every building in the municipality. With the effects of the quake felt across the north of the country, much of Gyumri, the ancient second city of Armenia some thirty miles away was leveled. As this occurred during Soviet times, the death toll was never confirmed, estimates ranging between 25,000 and 55,000, whilst over half a million

were made homeless. With temperatures plummeting to -12°C, many sought refuge in shipping containers. As of 2018, according to Vahan Toumasyan, President of the Shirak Centre NGO, there were still 1,800 inhabited containers in Gyumri alone, with no access to power or running water.

Following the Velvet Revolution of May 2018 which swept to power a popular *'people's government,'* today in Gyumri reconstruction work is finally gathering pace. Though it remains the capital of the poorest region in the country, the city is awash with new monuments, tree-lined boulevards, and trendy cafés. One doesn't have to go far from the center, however, to arrive in a wasteland of overgrown nettles, car chassis and rubble amidst which the forgotten people of Gyumri reside.

Having watched the disaster unfold from aboard a plane, former soldier Rafik suffers from PTSD.



Image Attribute: Rafik's shack / ©Klaus Richter

"It's the best container in town," he said of his home, expanded piecemeal over the years from rusted sheets of corrugated iron and asbestos. "I've worked hard to get here. I was just twenty-two when the earthquake struck. My best friend caught the flight before me, so he was on the ground and died. You still see traces of it everywhere in the city, so you're constantly reminded. At

first, the containers were everywhere, but then they moved us out of sight to the edge of town. If the city had been rebuilt, we could have moved on better. I had a good life here until the disaster, and now, thirty years later there are still containers and no jobs; there's sixty percent unemployment in Gyumri."

A few hundred meters across the shanty town, Susannah's family has occupied the same fetid two-room metal box since shortly after the earthquake.



Image Attribute: Susannah / © Klaus Richter

"Six of us live here," she explained. "In the summer it's too hot to sleep as the windows don't open and in the winter we never know if we'll be warm enough. There's no connection to gas or running water. When it rains, it drips down from the ceiling. It used to be worse, but we saved hard to renovate. We have a bit more than others around here," she added, clutching at a gold crucifix. "Even if we got a government apartment, it would only be two rooms, so I'd let my children have it. I'd stay here."



Image Attribute: Askya / © Klaus Richter

Inside eighty-two-year-old Askya's container, the ceiling was black and the walls thick with damp as she shuffled around in a snow leopard print dress. A bed, a gas burner, a table and chair, a doll and a broken black-and-white TV were the sum total of her possessions.

"I have so many memories of that day," she said. "We were in an apartment block when it struck. We saw the building opposite crumble and collapse, so we ran out of our flat. That night, although it was December, we slept on the streets. The next day tents were handed out to people, so we slept in a tent. Then I came here. There's no hope to receive anything more now. My husband died in 2008, and I've been alone out here ever since."



Image Attribute: Askya's Container / © Klaus Richter

Less than a mile from the center of the city, a half-collapsed four-storey block stands next to a luxury hotel replete with a red carpet. Its top two floors burnt-out, at the rear of the building, refrigerators, furniture, and clothing spill from the gutted center, the eerie silence of the unlit stairwell broken only by the howling of dogs.



Image Attribute: Karmen and Gayane's apartment next to a luxury hotel / © Stephen M. Bland

In a one-room apartment on the second floor live eighty-seven-year-old Karmen and eighty-one-year-old Gayane. With filler holding up the crumbling ceiling and the walls decorated with pictures cut from cardboard boxes, a single flickering light bulb leaves the room dark at the height of the day.

"We both grew up in orphanages," the diminutive, white-haired Karmen explained. "I started working in a textile factory at the age of twelve, as did Gayane. For forty-seven years we worked together in the same factory."

"We sacrificed our lives to the textile factory," said Gayane. "Now we're old ladies, I get 42,000 drams (\$86) a month pension, and Karmen a little more, but it's nothing for so many years of work."



Image Attribute: Eighty-seven-year-old Karmen and eighty-one-year-old Gayane / © Klaus Richter

"I've been living here since 1972," Karmen continued. "The building crumbled during the earthquake, but it didn't fall to pieces like it is today. The people who moved in after took the beams from the roof to sell as firewood until it finally collapsed in 2000. Then the center of the building gave way in the middle of the night in 2016."

"In 2004, a Russian hotelier bought the building. Now he wants to expand the hotel and says we have to get out, but where would we go?" Gayane blurted disdainfully. "Over the past thirty years, a lot of foreigners have come to see the conditions here, but no one has ever come from the government. There are so many abandoned buildings in the city; you could do something with them but they're just left sealed."

"Now, with the new government, though, we finally have a good guy in charge," Karmen chipped in, her weathered face lighting up. "He's from the common people, like us."

"We've been fighting a legal battle for almost ten years," Gayane concluded. "A decision will be reached soon. A new building is being constructed by the government and we want a flat there, but the people who still live in the containers will get a place first. Whatever happens though, we go together or we don't go at all."



Image Attribute: The Iron Fountain used to be the heart of the University of Gyumri campus / © Stephen M. Bland

About the Authors:

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