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Arsenic contamination in Georgia

Environment related security risks from old soviet legacy

The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection of Georgia presents its compliments to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and highly appreciates the existing collaboration in the field of environment protection and security.

Extreme hydro-meteorological on 27.09.2013 event caused flooding of the Tskhenistskali River and the change of the riverbed, which in its turn caused damage to the former metallurgical plant's dam in Lentekhi and subsequent leakage of arsenic waste material stored in steel barrels on the site (Tsana 1). At the request of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection of Georgia, the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany kindly dispatched the Analytical Task Force during the period of 29 September – 3 October, 2013. Representatives from Bundesamt für Bevölkerungsschutz und Katastrophenhilfe provided the experts with sampling and analysis assistance, technical support, provision of recommendations for the Ministry under these critical circumstances. The Government of Georgia carried out emergency on-site works as well as implemented the preliminary recommendations of the Analytical Task Force. Additional provisional resistance dam was built and the river Tskhenistskali was returned to its natural riverbed in order to avoid additional risks in case of extreme weather events. Furthermore, bank fortification works have been planned alongside the mentioned river area. The situation for the moment is stabilized and laboratory tests confirmed that concentration of harmful substances in both the river and reservoirs did not exceed the permissible limit. Nevertheless, the risk of pollution of the Tskhenistskali and Rioni rivers, which are part of the Black Sea basin, as well as the drinking water supply, remains rather high.

This case highlighted once again the dangerous ecological situation created in Ambrolauri and Lentekhi regions of Georgia and environment related security risks that may arise from this old soviet legacy. After the plants producing arsenic concentrate were closed in the 90s., plant premises were demolished and drums with arsenic waste material remain scattered around openly on the sites, polluting the environment and causing risks to human health. About 100,000 tons of wastes containing arsenic are accumulated in the villages of Tsana and Uravi. The sites are located in the basin of the Tskhenistskhali and Rioni rivers and there is an existing high risk of arsenic leakage. In the past the Ministry of Environment took several efforts as well as initiated discussions on the issue with different line ministries, scientific institutions, NGOs, other experts as well as local population to develop and implement effective measures. The importance of the matter is underlined in the National Environmental Action Programme for 2012-2016 and the issue is identified as particularly dangerous. In accordance with the agreement reached in 2012 with the government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands a project for arsenic containing mine waste in Georgia is conducted by “Witteveen+Bos”, Dutch consultancy

and engineering firm. A study of arsenic-containing ashes and sludge in villages of Tsana and Uravi has been conducted. Nevertheless, implementation of the urgent measures, sarcophagus construction and safe disposal of arsenic containing waste materials requires additional funding for insuring the population and environmental safety in Georgia.

The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection of Georgia is deeply concerned over the current situation. Given the fact that “Management of Transboundary Natural Resources and Industrial Legacies “ is one of the priority areas of the ENVSEC Initiative in the South Caucasus, the assistance will be provided by ENVSEC to support following activities in Lentekhi Region:

- based on existing documents and study, a detailed on-site assessment;
- elaboration of an action plan for safe transportation and disposal of arsenic containing waste materials;
- identification of standards and size parameters for sarcophagus construction or other options for remediation;
- conduct detailed cost assessment for required activities.

The above mentioned activities are of particular importance and great urgency to ensure that the actual remediation work starts in spring 2014. Herewith, UNDP and OCHA will be involved in the abovementioned activities in Lentekhi and Ambrolauri Regions.

The government of Georgia is addressing to the international community to support implementation of the urgent measures, sarcophagus construction and safe disposal of arsenic containing waste materials, which require additional funding to insure the population and environmental safety in the country.