

## Informal mining of radioactive dumps linked to cancer rise (Kyrgystan)

*That is a real danger when people haven't enough to ignore garbage dumps.*

Alert Net (IRIN)  
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Hundreds of people dressed in dirty clothes and masks are digging in a refuse site for lumps of silicon just 10 metres from a radioactive waste dump in the northern Kyrgyz village of Orlovka, 100 km east of the capital, Bishkek.

Through the stench of rotting rubbish and the dust, "miners" sitting around eating and drinking become aggressive when asked if they are aware of the dangers they face.

"Go away! I need to work. There is no radiation here. If there was radiation, we would all be sick already," Azamat, 32, from the neighbouring village of Bistrovka, shouted.

A legacy of the Soviet Union's uranium enrichment programme, many radioactive waste dumps in the mountainous Central Asian state remain a real danger to health until they can be safely neutralised.

But the dumps – consisting of soil and rocks discarded after uranium has been extracted – are attractive to those seeking precious metals that they can sell, despite the risks. The silicon they find sells for about US \$10 per kilo and ends up in China where it is used in the manufacture of semiconductors.

According to the US-based Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), an NGO working to strengthen global security by reducing the spread of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, there are 36 uranium tailings sites and 25 uranium mining dump sites in the former Soviet republic.

Home to some 8,000 residents, Orlovka is a former industrial settlement. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, factories and plants in the area ground to a halt and many local residents lost their jobs, forcing many plant workers into improvised mining to make a living.

Nurbek, a local taxi driver living in Orlovka since 1992, said that illegal mining started in 1994. "During that time, even I worked there and we were looking for copper, then for aluminum, now people search for silicon," he explained.

The illegal mining tends to be seasonal – reaching a high point before spring when work on the land begins. "We need to earn some money to get fuel for tractors and to cultivate the land, that's why we do it. In two weeks I am sure people will stop their work," Tynchtyk, 28, another miner, said.

Some 40 percent of the country's 5.1 million inhabitants live below the national poverty line, according to the World Bank

Illegal mining in Orlovka had been highlighted after some local NGOs and a national television channel claimed in February that the miners were falling sick from working in the radioactive waste.

Experts from the Kyrgyz Ministry of Emergency examined the site after the claims and found that the radioactive dumps had not been disturbed by mining, but noted that

radioactivity levels in and around the dumps in some cases were up to 10 times the norm, they said.

But specialists from the State Epidemiological Monitoring Department (SEMD) concluded after a field mission to Orlovka that the level of radiation there was not harmful to health.

In an effort to prevent any radioactive leaks, the Orlovka council decided to shut down the site and ban local residents from searching for scrap silicon in the area.

Local medical staff confirm the dump is being linked to a rise in serious disease in the community.

Nuria Dotalieva, a family doctor in Orlovka, said that after 1997 there had been a steady rise in the number of cancer cases in the village. "There are 108 registered cases in our village already. And that is not only among old people, but also young ones as well," Dotalieva clarified.

This equates to one cancer patient per 75 residents in the village – roughly 16 times the national average rate for cancer.

"Last year one person died from leukemia and in general there is a rise of pulmonary diseases among young people and children as well," Irina Mamatkulova, another family doctor in the town, added.

Although the authorities banned illegal mining in the dump more than a week ago, local villagers continue to come with their children to the area. "We have been working here for almost 10 years and we're still here," Kyialbek Baike, 40, an illegal miner, said as he shoveled earth into a basket in the hope of finding silicon.