

are the only means of getting anything into or out of the country, thus eliminating all but the most essential humanitarian assistance traffic. Basic goods cannot be imported or exported, and Armenia's potential as an East-West merchant link and trade route has been stymied.

Harsh Quality of Life

The effects of four years of blockade have been devastating. Armenia's energy supply is a trickle, and the people are not getting elementary services. There is no hot running water available anywhere, except for those rare individuals or foreign embassies which can bring in their own generators to supply power. In Yerevan, the capital city of more than a million people, even cold running water is rationed, and roughly 20 percent of the population is without it completely; it is not unusual to see people hoisting buckets of water, by pulley, to the upper stories of their apartment buildings. Electricity is strictly rationed, with the typical building supplied for about four hours a day. With no regular electricity of course, there is no refrigeration, which results in the quick spoilage of food, medicine and other essentials.

Fuel of all types is scarce. Four years ago, Yerevan was bustling with cars and tour buses, road repair vehicles and delivery trucks. Today even the central square can be unearthly quiet. For the fourth winter in a row, there was no fuel to heat the city's buildings. Portable kerosene heaters from Japan, and supplies of kerosene donated by the United States, eased the burden somewhat this past winter, for those who could afford to buy the heaters. But it is a sign of how extreme conditions have become that a family would rejoice at the prospect of taking the bitter cold edge off of a room with a kerosene-fueled space heater. With winter temperatures typically below freezing, a portable heater is not much comfort.

Those with means can buy propane gas tanks to fuel their kitchen stoves. At \$25 per tank, however, most people cannot afford one. The average income in Armenia is 250 drams a month, which is less than a dollar at current exchange rates. (One U.S. dollar will now bring 310 drams.) With a loaf of bread costing 25 drams, a kilo of cheese costing 200, a jar of tomato paste costing 150, and a single can of Coca-Cola costing 250, the pitiful value of a month's salary is apparent. That \$25 propane tank would translate into 7,750 drams, or two and one-half years of salary.

Without a means of importing raw materials and exporting finished goods, Armenian industry has effectively been suspended. Once bustling rubber and shoe factories are virtually idle, and even the once fabulously successful mineral water bottling plant has dramatically scaled back production. The nation's single nuclear power plant has been idle since the 1988 earthquake, amid concerns over its structural safety and nuclear waste disposal. Unemployment and underemployment are endemic. The government reports that more than 300,000 Armenians permanently left the country in the last two years, which is probably an underestimate. There are as many people of Armenian ancestry living outside Armenia — about 3.5 million — as there are living inside. Nearly 1 million are in the United States.

Signs of Regeneration

Despite such harsh conditions of life, there are extraordinary signs of vitality and hope in Armenia today. The first-rate symphony orchestra, underwritten by funds from the Armenian diaspora, performs weekly concerts — all matinees, of necessity due to the prevail-

ing lack of power and light. The government manages to supply the nine-station Yerevan metro system with enough energy to operate until 10 p.m. A new graduate university was established three years ago with the government's encouragement, under joint sponsorship of the University of California and the Armenian General Benevolent Union in New York. Other diasporan Armenian organizations, such as the Armenian Relief Society and the Armenian Assembly of America, have channeled resources into educational and environmental programs, including an ambitious project to replenish the forests which were sacrificed this winter by people in desperate need of wood to heat their homes. Individual entrepreneurs are somehow starting small businesses, like little restaurants, electronic mail services, a book translation and publishing company, and a new radio station. The government is ceding ownership of apartments to the lawful occupants, at virtually no cost, in one of many privatization programs.

To be sure, there are also some disturbing signs that the old communist economic tyranny has been replaced by another sinister menace. Many segments of the struggling Armenian economy — banking, fuel, major construction — are said to be controlled by virtual monopolies, which the people call "mafias," some of which are totally outside the government's reach. (These "mafias" had their origins in Soviet times, as people tried to find ways to circumvent the tight grip Moscow had on Armenian economic life.) Most senior government officials, and their staffs, work around the clock in trying to bring order to a diffuse and often private-interest-driven system. Yet they have virtually no assistance from the bureaucratic apparatus which might help them exercise meaningful control, in part because the government cannot afford to pay its bureaucrats a salary decent enough to inspire loyalty and energy. (A government employee earning 1,000 drams a month, i.e. \$3.30, would be at the high end of the pay scale.)

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TO THE RELIEF and surprise of many Western observers, and perhaps to its own astonishment, the Armenian government, with all of its economic preoccupations, is continuing the process of democratic reform which began even before the Soviet Union dissolved.

In 1991, while still a Soviet state, the Armenian republic made the first formal declarations, as required under the USSR's constitution, indicating that it would consider the issue of Armenia's independence. Armenia also became the first Soviet republic to elect a president in a democratic, contested election. Nearly 80 percent of the electorate voted for Levon Ter Petrosian, a scientist who had helped organize the Armenia/Karabagh movement and had served time in a Soviet jail as a political prisoner. A popularly-elected Parliament has also been convened.

With the dissolution of the USSR, the Soviet and Soviet-Armenian constitutions became irrelevant. The new Armenian government, like the governments of other former Soviet republics, has been conducting business under a mix of legislative acts and presidential decrees.

Notwithstanding four years of heightening economic stress, and growing popular dissatisfaction over the government's inability to overcome the effects of the blockade and relative Western indifference, the government has continued the democratization process. A presidential commission was created to draft a constitution. A coalition of six political parties represented in Parliament also drafted a constitution. At least two oth-