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IREX Fellow and Health Care in Azerbaijan

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Writing article poolside with Alpha Smart 3000

Overview

As an Azerbaijan trained physician I am in the United States as part of a special program through the State Department. As an IREX (International Research and Exchange's Board) Fellow, I am conducting research and participating in community based health care clinics as a volunteer. My purposes in writing this descriptive article are twofold; first, to provide an overview of my home country of Azerbaijan, and second to offer a glimpse of the health care education structure in Azerbaijan..

Azerbaijann



<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/europe/azerbaijan/>

Azerbaijan has been an independent republic since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Despite a cease-fire, in place since 1994, Azerbaijan has yet to resolve its conflict with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave (largely Armenian populated area). Azerbaijan has lost almost twenty per cent of its territory as a result of this war. Also we have about one million (13% of population) as refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). During the war 30,000 people were killed, and about 30% of our country's population have directly suffered. The majority of the IDPs and refugees are settled in public premises, homes of relatives or friends, in refugee camps and in commodity sites. Ninety three percent of them live in non-acceptable unsanitary conditions with no safe water, electricity, and health services (Sigma Center, 1998)

The military conflict seriously exacerbated the normal transition problem in the country. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) declined by over 20% in 1992, 1993, and 1994 and 17% in 1995; 25% of the labor force are estimated to be unemployed.

According to World Bank in 1995 61.5% of the population was poor and 20.4% was extremely poor. The recent improvements in the economy have not significantly affected the poverty situation.

Azerbaijan is situated south of Russia. It also borders Georgia, Armenia, Iran and, just 11 km of Turkey. The province of Nakhichevan, which borders Iran, is cut off from the main part of Azerbaijan by Armenia. Mountains, including the Caucasus



(Shahdagh mountain in Caucasus mountain range, [Azerbaijan International](#), p. 22)

and Talish ranges

and the Karabakh Plateau, dominate three sides of the country. Between the mountains are valleys and lowlands with rich flora and fauna. Azerbaijan also has a subtropical zone known for its exotic plants, including pomegranate, persimmon, fig, olive, orange, tangerine, and saffron.

The Caspian Sea forms Azerbaijan's eastern border. Enormous oil and gas reserves beneath the sea hold great wealth potential. The Caspian is also rich in biological life; it holds 90% of the world's sturgeon.



(Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan International, p. 19)

Azerbaijan declared itself independent in 1918 but was suppressed by Russia's Red Army in 1920 and made part of the Soviet Union. In 1922, it was combined with Georgia and Armenia as the Transcaucasian Soviet Federal Republic.

In 1936, it became a Soviet Socialist Republic, remaining through the 1980s. A violent conflict with Armenia erupted in the late 1980s regarding the area of Nagorno Karabakh (mountainous black garden), which is part of Azerbaijan but is inhabited mostly by Armenians.

A large refugee problem, battles over supply lines, and the Soviet Union's inability to stop the fighting caused great hardship in the country. In 1994, the United Nations Security Council demanded that Armenia withdraw from Azerbaijan, where it had seized up to twenty percent of the territory and displaced one million people. A cease-fire went into effect, but Armenian troops remained; progress seems uncertain. By 2001, the truce was holding, but no real progress had been made in the peace process.

The current population is more than 8 million people, of which almost ninety percent are Azeri. Minorities include Russians, Tatars, Talish, Georgians, Ukrainians, Armenians, Lezghians, Kurd, and others. Azeri belongs to the Oghuz group of Turkish languages and is similar to modern Turkish. Many Azeris can speak Russian, and many of the country's publications are in Russian.

The economy of Azerbaijan is based on the production of oil and natural gas. With its huge Caspian Sea reserves, Azerbaijan has great potential for economic development. Construction, exploration and production contracts with foreign oil firms will benefit

Azerbaijan in the form of new jobs, foreign capital, and high revenues. A new pipeline is being planned to deliver oil from the Caspian to the Mediterranean Sea.

In agriculture, the most important cash crops are cotton and tobacco. Azerbaijan also exports fruits, vegetables, nuts, grapes, and saffron.

Health care in Azerbaijan

Medical care is provided free, but facilities are not well equipped. Rural areas especially, lack clinics and equipment.

There are different kind of health facilities including clinical hospitals, central district hospitals, maternity hospitals, rural hospitals, polyclinics, Woman Consultations, family planning centers, doctor ambulance, and Feldsher Obstetric Points in the country.

Polyclinics, Woman Consultations, Family planning Centers, doctor ambulance, and Feldsher Obstetric Points are administered for outpatients and the rest health facilities for inpatients

Along with education, health care used to receive the Azerbaijan's priority. Everyone has access to it and it is free. There are many fairly advanced medical facilities throughout Azerbaijan. Even villages in remote mountain passes in the Caucasus have access to medically trained personnel. Medical education is provided at the Azerbaijan State Medical University, Azerbaijan Medical Training Institute and several medical colleges. Many specialized centers are in Baku, alone-Oncology, Urology, Rheumatology, Hematology, Ophthalmology, Diagnostic, and numerous others.

Education and training of health care workers in Azerbaijan

Education is provided free through the university level. The government spends more of its budget on education than on anything else except defense. A number of colleges and universities are available; most are located in Baku. Medical personnel are trained and retrained through medical universities, training medical institutes and medical colleges.

Schools are not divided into levels. Children graduate from the same school they began attending at age six or seven. Eight years of attendance are mandatory and the final three are optional. Those who choose not to complete the full 11 years may attend trade school to learn a profession.

Every graduate from secondary has a right to apply to a university or college to gain admittance. In order to enter the universities or colleges the applicants are required to pass certain examinations. According to the result of the exams, applicants are chosen for the universities or colleges.

The students of Medical University have to study 6 years. The training of students consists of theoretical and practical parts. According to the theoretical part of education the student attends lectures and seminars on different subjects including anatomy, biology, chemistry, biological chemistry, histology, physiology, pathology physiology, pathology anatomy, internal diseases, surgery, neurology diseases, kidney diseases, skin diseases, X-ray investigation, rheumatology, and others.

Selection of the students for specializations are carried out at the beginning of the sixth year of education. Graduates from the medical university complete a year internship. During the internship the new graduates gain practice at the hospitals.

Duration of education of nurses and feldshers is two or two and a half years. In the colleges education consists of two parts. Theoretical and practical. The nurses carry out doctors' prescriptions, but feldshers are responsible for carrying out doctors' prescriptions and also for treatment of common diseases where there are no doctors

Policy of Ministry of Health of Azerbaijan is that physicians should be trained in each three or five years through the Azerbaijan State Training Institute. The nurses and feldshers are trained through courses or seminars that are usually organized by MOH or Public Health of districts.

IREX Fellow

Overview

Currently, I am a participant on the FSA Contemporary Fellowship Program funded by the US Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and administered by the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX). Through this fellowship, I am completing research on "Community participation in health care issues and voluntarism. American experience."

Social aspects

As an IREX Fellow I am also associated with a public US university, the University of Central Florida in Orlando. The official liaison at UCF is the Eastern Europe Linkage Institute, directed by Jean Kijek, RN, Ph.D.



(Social reception with Eastern European visitors, Dr. Kijek on far left)

Additionally, since housing is not provided by IREX, I am lodging with a host family. As I am a good cook, I have made many Azerian meals for my host family. It is a way of “paying them back” for their kindness.



Iskandar, the “chef” preparing borsht

I wrote this article using a Alpha Smart 3000, battery powered typing device. I could go to the library or even sit by the pool at my host family’s home.

My project

Community participation in health care in Azerbaijan is very low and needs to be increased. Nonprofit organization can and should play a major role in involving communities in health care. But how can NGOs increase community participation in health care? How can one measure the effect of educational interventions on health status of people? I am examining this problem in the country with rich traditions of

voluntarism. Conducting a research in the United States helps me study American involvement in community participation in health care and voluntarism.



(Visiting “Healing the Children” clinic)

I will also be completing an Internship of one month. During this period I will be a volunteer at a community clinic.

Through my host family and job responsibilities I have visited classrooms of teachers in Health Occupations. During one visit to a Dental Assistant program I met an oral surgeon from Russia, who was currently a student in this program. We were able to chat in the classroom in Russian.



(at Brevard Community College, Dental Assistant program)

References

Azerbaijan International, Summer 2001.

Related Web sites

Slides about Azerbaijan,

<http://www.azpan.az:8101/english/slides/slides.html> Panorama of Azerbaijan, <http://www.azpan.az:8101/> .

WELCOME TO BAKU, The capital of Azerbaijan , <http://www.baku.com/> .

Virtual Azerbaijan, <http://www-scf.usc.edu/~baguirov/azeri.htm> .