

Khaidarkan Mercury

Addressing primary mercury mining in Kyrgyzstan



Geography and geopolitics



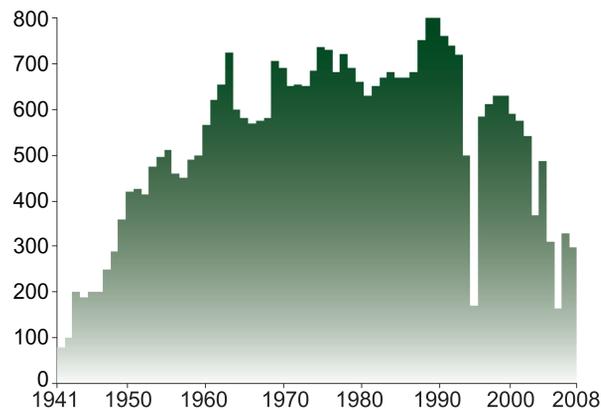
By most standards Khaidarkan is remote, wedged in the precipitous mountains of south-west Kyrgyzstan and reached by a narrow road over a 2,300-metre pass. The mercury mine and smelter date from 1941, from the days of the Soviet Union. The mine equipment and infrastructure were located at Khaidarkan following evacuation of industrial facilities from Ukraine during the Second World War. The Khaidarkan region had exploitable mercury deposits and it was unthinkable that the enemy could reach Central Asia. The remoteness of the mine, which was an advantage during the war, is now considered a challenge to the further economic development of the region.

Significant mercury reserves remain at deeper depths at Khaidarkan, but investment has not been forthcoming to allow their exploitation. Even if this were possible, there are also significant cash flow challenges, which impact on workers' pay. The region, much as many other regions in the former Soviet Union, has also experienced a significant "brain drain" of skilled workers, who have left for better opportunities elsewhere. And beyond every calculation of survival there looms the reality of the upcoming negotiation of a global legally binding instrument on mercury that will include provisions to reduce the global supply of and demand for mercury. However, there is loyal and strong support for the kombinat by the population in and around Khaidarkan.



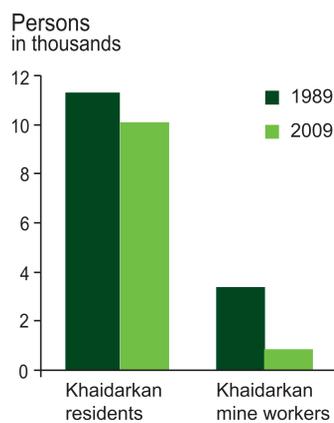
Mercury production in Kyrgyzstan

Mercury production in Kyrgyzstan in tonnes



Mining town and people

Khaidarkan feels like a frontier town, but a quiet one. Even the market seems relaxed and unhurried. The few people in the streets are friendly enough to visitors, but they do not bother to hide their concern about the future of the kombinat – and their own. It is in every sense a company town. Not only does the town's economy depend on the mercury mine – for example, irrigation water is also supplied directly by the kombinat. The town is home to about 10,000 people. In 1989 3,500 of Khaidarkan's townspeople were directly employed by the kombinat. That number had fallen to 1,500 by the mid-1990s, and to 750 in 2008. The main alternative employment is agriculture – livestock, or growing apples, potatoes, carrots and cereals. Some 40% of people in Batken province still earn less than the minimum subsistence level. There are not many options for job-seekers in this district of south-western Kyrgyzstan, which explains the anxiety in the town that the kombinat should continue working, even if it has to find a very different raison d'être. This in turn probably helps to explain the apparent indifference of many people in Khaidarkan to the possibility that they are living in a polluted environment.



Alternativas

The future of the mine, the smelter and ultimately the town of Khaidarkan itself largely depends on how mercury production can be replaced with other economic activities. Sustaining people's livelihoods beyond cinnabar mining and processing will be the main objective and here the UN project and the Kyrgyz action plan have sketched out potential solutions:

- Gold mining
- Industrial minerals
- Agriculture and small-scale development



History

Mercury, to the Romans, was the messenger of the gods. Today's mercury is more prosaic: a planet, and also a metal, known sometimes as quicksilver. It was widely used in thermometers, scientific instruments (due to its unique chemical properties), as well as many other products and processes. The use of mercury, however, is being reduced throughout the world due to its toxicity and the availability of substitutes. Certain forms of mercury and its compounds can damage neurological development and affect internal organs. Effects are most pronounced in pregnant women, infants and children. Mercury can spread far and wide through air and water: it is found as far from industrial centres as the Arctic. It is ingested by fish and other marine life, where it becomes concentrated as it moves up the food chain.

The world's governments agreed at the United Nations Environment Programme Governing Council in 2009 to prepare a legally binding instrument on mercury to protect human health and the environment from mercury. The Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee is to develop a comprehensive and suitable approach to mercury, including provisions to reduce the supply of mercury taking into account the circumstances of countries. Negotiations are to conclude in 2013.

There is now only one known mercury mine in the world which continues to sell its output abroad: Khaidarkan, in the remote mountains of southern Kyrgyzstan.

