

Armenia: Renovated Courthouses Give New Meaning to Justice



YEREVAN, Armenia - The First Instance Community Courthouse in the center of Yerevan is so dilapidated, you can see through the run-down concrete landings as you climb its perilous stairs.

Look at the ceiling of one of its four small courtrooms and you will see extensive water damage. And in the yellow corridor, with any luck, you may come face to face with a handcuffed criminal. Defendants, judges, witnesses and relatives mingle uneasily in the same badly-lit, smoke-filled space, waiting for justice to be done.

So it is no surprise that Hrach Hovhannisyian, 53, one of the court's nine judges, prefers to conduct 95% of his sessions – trying civil, administrative and even criminal cases - in his private office.



"There's an agreement among judges that unless the case is big, has media attention or is of public interest, we try the cases in our offices," he says. When trials do take place in the intended court rooms, he says the shabby furniture and rickety floors fill him with shame.

A World Bank loan to the Ministry of Justice aims to put an end to the sub-standard conditions and imperfect legal practices that give courts a bad name in Armenia.

By the end of the Judicial Reform Project, in June 2006, 10 courthouses will have been extensively renovated and an additional two built from scratch. The project also includes legal training, the introduction of case management software, and a highly popular Court TV show that is building awareness of legal rights among ordinary Armenians.

The project is crucial. In a survey of public attitudes conducted in December 1999-January 2000, courts were perceived as being corrupt and partial. Public trust was critically low. And the judiciary was considered the worst performing governmental body.



The physical overhaul of courthouses is a decisive first step towards improving the quality of justice. "Case management software – which cuts down on favoritism - is useless in a courthouse subject to power cuts," notes David Bernstein, the World Bank's point-man ("Task Team Leader") on this project.

Moreover, "the conditions of a courthouse have drastic psychological and fairness implications for all involved - judges, staff and citizens," says Chief Judge Jora Vardanyan, chairman of the Center Community court.

"When a citizen enters a court house, he or she should understand from the very entrance that this is the place where justice will be done," he says.



The old Center Community Court does not inspire much trust. Because the judiciary was not considered an important branch of power under Communism, courthouses -unlike Party headquarters or even cultural centers – did not tend to be impressive buildings and were badly maintained, explains Judge Hovhannisyian.

The Center Community Court was set up in the early 1960s in a partially-converted worker's dormitory. (There are still private apartments in the same crumbling building. On sad occasions when a resident dies, the courthouse adjourns its business for several hours, out of respect.)

Notes from court sessions are transcribed using a ballpoint pen by a secretary in a crowded office where

people constantly come and go.

Court records are bundled with string. Stacked by year in a dark room, they seem more fit for recycling than for consultation.

And no one wants to linger in court rooms where the ceiling and the floor may well collapse mid-session.

In fact, the building is in such bad shape, experts decided not to salvage it. The Center Community Court will be moved in 2006 to a brand new courthouse, still under construction on Tigran Metc avenue, a busy central street.

A visit to a new Appeals Courthouse in Yerevan is a study in contrast.



The building, inaugurated in February 2005, was once a technical college made of solid-looking pink volcanic stone. The World Bank's USD 1.4 million top-to-bottom renovation safeguarded frescos by Minas Avetisyan, a famous local artist. Tall windows bathe public spaces in light and an autonomous heating system should translate into greater public attendance of trials.

"When you enter such a building you have more hope," comments Susanna Haroutanyan, a woman in her 40s resting in the public square in front of the new stately courthouse. "Of course, justice depends on the people, but the building changes the mood and the approach to justice," she says.

Guards, a metal detector and special passes secure the building, which, unlike many old courthouses, has well divided space. Internal space is divided in three areas: open to the general public; limited to court personnel and judges; and restricted cells for criminals used before and after court hearings. All three areas are separated by special door control security systems that are operated with special plastic cards.

"In the past, anyone could walk in and meet the judges. Not anymore," says Tigran Sahakyan, Chairman of the Appeals Court for Criminal and Military Cases, one of the three courts housed in the renovated building. Cases are no longer judged in private offices, and sessions, under constant recording, are transcribed electronically. As a result, "people are more accountable and legal procedures are more convincing," says Sahakyan.

Sahakyan argues that higher salaries would perhaps grant judges more independence and eliminate the temptation of shadowy deals. In the meantime, he thinks the new courthouses set the stage for an important decline in corruption.



* * *

Published in November 2005

Read more about the [Judicial Reform Project \(2000-2006\)](#).

Also read about a World Bank-backed [court TV show](#) that is improving awareness of legal rights in Armenia.