

Kyrgyzstan

MAILBOX 200

by Riccardo Bononi





Sonkol lake - Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan has a long nomadic tradition, among the peoples of Central Asia most dedicated to livestock farming and capable of moving them at regional intervals thanks to the agility of their traditional homes, the yurts. With the annexation to the Soviet Union, many abandoned this lifestyle, preferring life in the cities and work in the large Soviet factories. The need for national identity following independence, however, has made many rediscover their roots in ancient nomadic traditions.

The Kyrgyzstan's Uranium Legacy

The secret village of Mayлуу-Suu, identified by the Soviet Atomic Project with just the postal address "Mailbox 200", was recently included by the Blacksmith Institute among the most radioactive places on the planet, among with Chernobyl and Fukushima, but potentially much more dangerous. Despite the major threat for their health, local population refuses to leave, minimizing or even denying the problem.

Life there, although statistically significantly shortened, continues to flow, as if the citizens did not want to believe in a killer - the radiation - that their eyes cannot see.

In the case of radiation, what is imperceptible to the eye can instead have visible effects on analog pictures: in an attempt to give a shape to the "invisible", the 35 mm films from this project were exposed to the same average amount of radiation that the body of a person living in Malyuu-Suu absorbs every year. From 1946 to 1968, more than 10,000 tonnes of uranium were extracted and processed here, and were used by the nuclear program to build the Russian atomic arsenal, including the very first soviet nuclear bomb.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, 2,000,000 m³ of radioactive waste were abandoned, buried in the mountains surrounding the city, along the river. The latest measurements from the UNDP detected radioactivity levels of 500 nSV/h, with peaks of 5000 nSV/h near the most compromised sites. To date, Russia has not yet admitted its responsibilities and has not taken part in the Kyrgyz government's clean-up plan, while maintaining military interests in Kyrgyzstan and in its still vast reserve of uranium.

Some films were exposed (in the radiology lab at Bassano del Grappa Hospital) to radiation of 44 mSv, calculated as the average amount of radiation a human body is yearly exposed living next to the most compromised radioactive waste tailing ponds in Mayлуу-Suu, according to UN measurements. For comparison, In Europe the average amount of radiation absorbed yearly by a human body is 2.4 mSv.

After the process, the negatives resulted desaturated, with an increase in contrast, a marked color shift to warm temperatures and, above all, a strong noise despite the low sensitivity of the film (ISO 100).



Malyuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 1.4 km from the nearest radioactive waste tailing dump: the golden statue of Lenin overlooks the square dedicated to him, where the small Mayluu-Suu City Uranium Legacy History Museum was inaugurated this year. According to the UN, one million cubic meters of radioactive waste are buried in the mountains in the background.

Bishkek - Kyrgyzstan. A monument called The Peaceful Atom in front of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences in the capital Bishkek. The legacy of the Soviet past has forever linked the country to the atomic war industry, and a strong sense of guilt accompanied by a desire for redemption is a feeling shared by the population.





Mayluu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 800 mt. from the nearest radioactive waste dump: a boy is waiting for a friend to try out his new tricks with the skateboard. Above his head, the water pipe which, passing from the river through the contaminated areas, supplies the entire neighborhood where the boys live in one of the old Soviet buildings in the background.



Malyuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 50 mt. from the nearest radioactive waste tailing dump: anti-radiation rubber boots abandoned in one of the plants for the enrichment and the processing of uranium oxide in the north of Mayluu-Suu.



A warning sign of ionizing radiation. The new ISO 21482 signs, introduced in 2007, demarcate most of the areas surrounding Malyuu-Suu. The new sign, which will gradually replace the traditional black clover symbol on a yellow background, was born after a research lasting 5 years and conducted in 11 countries among predominantly illiterate populations. It is designed to be intuitively understandable among less educated people even after many centuries in the future.



Safety tapes collected 8 km from the radioactive waste dump No.5, west of Kadzhi Say, in the surrounding of the former Soviet military facility in Tong, on the shores of the Lake Issik kol. Many tapes have been blown away by the wind and washed onto the beach. The international signs (in English) have been used for the tourists visiting that area (which also host an art festival in the summer). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the most contaminated areas were delimited only by barbed wire, stolen after less than six months to be reused in the neighboring fields and farms.



Malyuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 40 meters from the nearest radioactive waste tailing dump: inside one of the abandoned uranium mines in Mayluu-Suu. Nowadays the mines are open to anyone, and are often used by shepherds as improvised stables for the cattle.



Malyuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 40 meters from the nearest radioactive waste tailing dump: the main entrance of one of the abandoned uranium mines in Mayluu-Suu. Between 1946 and 1968, gulag prisoners from the Soviet Union extracted more than 10,000 tonnes of uranium. Nowadays the mines are open to anyone, without military control nor particular warning signs or fences.



Malyuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 1000 m. from the nearest radioactive waste deposit: some elderly ladies (babushka in Russian) return to Mayluu-Suu after a day working in the nearby cities. There is only a single public transport to reach the city, a so-called Maršrutka: a shared taxi whose payment is divided among all passengers.



Malyuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 1000 meters from the nearest radioactive waste tailing dump: the Malyuu-Suu river, which is generated in the mountains north of the city, runs through the entire valley to flow into the bigger Naryn River. This will then flow into the Fergana Valley, one of the most populated areas of Central Asia with 12 million inhabitants, crossing the borders of three states: Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The river provides drinking water to all the villagers, as well as being used for personal hygiene, livestock farming and agriculture.



Malyuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 180 meters from the nearest radioactive waste tailing dump: a girl walks on one of the city's main water pipe, which passes right through the 23 deposits of waste from the uranium enrichment process. Behind her, a truck transports dirt collected in the area where most of the waste is buried on the northern edge of the city.

The picture was taken in 1948, depicting gulag prisoners from present-day Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan pose in Malyuu-Suu Mine No.2. None of them were informed of the radioactive nature of the material being mined, and most workers died within a few years of starting work in the mine from radiation complications. Courtesy of the Mailuu-suu City and Kyrgyzstan's Uranium Legacy History Museum, founded by the European Union, Osce and UNDP.

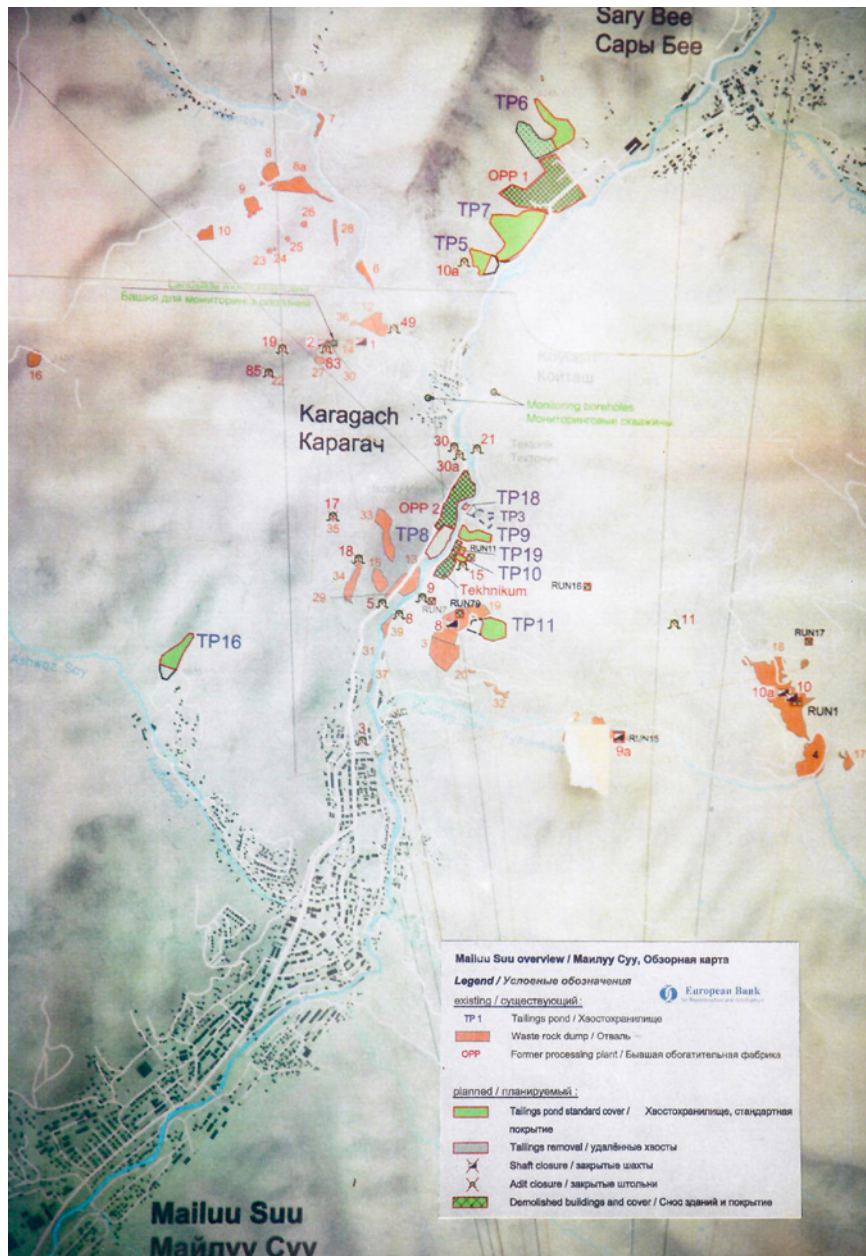




Malyuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 1.5 km from the nearest radioactive waste tailing dump: a worker inside the Lampovyy Zavod industrial plant, the largest light bulb factory in the Soviet Union. In 1964 the Supreme Soviet for the National Economy of the USSR, ordered the construction in Mayluu-Suu of one of the largest light bulb factories in the Union. The soviet Mailbox 200, which still required special permission to enter, lost its secrecy and opened its doors to workers from all over the USSR: even today, mostly Russian, Kazakh, Uzbek and Tajik workers reside here.

Bishkek - Kyrgyzstan. A monument to the peaceful atom, right in front of the Soviet institution at the heart of the Atomic Project which led to the construction of one of the most fearsome nuclear arsenals in the world, is more than a clear message. In May 2019 the Krygыз Supreme Council voted to ban the mining and exploration of new uranium veins, except for the recovery of uranium in the reclamation of existing Soviet deposits. To date, neither the ban nor the exception have yet been respected.





Mailuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 800 meters from the nearest radioactive waste deposit: a map of the city of Malyuu-Suu where the uranium enrichment facilities (OPP), the 23 containment tanks for radioactive waste (TP, in green) and the radioactive waste deposits are marked waste buried underground (in orange). The distance between the main sites and the inhabited areas is practically non-existent in the northern part of the city, and the passage of the river through the contaminated areas is evident.



Mailuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 1500 m. from the nearest radioactive waste dump: a drunken ex-Russian soldier shows off an old tattoo that identified his unit in the army: the weeping bullet. He now permanently lives in Mayлуу-Suu.



Malyuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 30 meters from the nearest radioactive waste tailing dump: the landscape of the western city limits of Malyuu-Suu. On the left, the land where the radioactive waste was buried, just a few meters away from the first inhabited houses.



Malyuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 1000 meters from the nearest radioactive waste tailing dump: on the hills of Malyuu-Suu stands one of the largest Orthodox cemeteries in Kyrgyzstan, a country with over 90% of the population being Muslim. The names on the gravestones are almost entirely Russian, belonging to the miners and workers employed in the collection and processing of uranium from 1946 to 1968. Especially at the beginning of the program, the miners came entirely from the gulag, Russian dissidents or German prisoners of war, who transported tons of uranium on donkeys, totally unaware of the radioactive nature of the minerals collected.



Malyuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 1000 meters from the nearest radioactive waste tailing dump: a boy, living at the north-western edge of Mayluu-Suu, leaves his house to ride his horse to the city center.



Malyuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 1.5 km from the nearest radioactive waste tailing dump: the Mayluu-suu sport center and stadium, where boys and girls can play many sports and spend the day with their friends.



Malyuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 40 meters from the nearest radioactive waste tailing dump: cows graze just under the ionizing radiation hazard sign, over the ground where a big rock waste dump is. Goats, cows and horses drink from the nearby river and usually graze in these areas.



Jyrgalan - Kyrgyzstan. An abandoned Soviet facility is now used as a stable for horses and livestock.



Malyuu-Suu, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 1.5 km from the nearest radioactive waste tailing dump: a worker inside the Lampovyy Zavod industrial plant, the largest light bulb factory in the Soviet Union. In 1964 the Supreme Soviet for the National Economy of the USSR, ordered the construction in Mayluu-Suu of one of the largest light bulb factories in the Union. The soviet Mailbox 200, which still required special permission to enter, lost its secrecy and opened its doors to workers from all over the USSR: even today, mostly Russian, Kazakh, Uzbek and Tajik workers reside here.



Kochkor-Ata sanatorium, Jalal-Abad region - Kyrgyzstan. 20 km from the nearest radioactive waste tailing dump: the broadcasting of the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Kyrgyzstan on December 9th 2022, for the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) Summit. During the meeting with his counterpart Sadir Japarov, the sanitization plan for Soviet radioactive waste repositories was not considered a priority, but instead they talked about the memorandum of collaboration with the Russian public company Rosatom signed in January 2022 for the construction of the first nuclear power plant in the country.

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