

Campaigners say pollution from the coal mined and burned at Yatagan power plant, 40 km (25 miles) from some of Turkey's Mediterranean and Aegean beach resorts, has led to major health and environmental damage. Across Turkey, authorities are pushing ahead with plans to more than double coal power capacity. The government says it has to reduce high import dependency for energy that accounts for a fifth of the total value of Turkey's imports and is a significant factor behind years of current account deficits.

Behind Tayyibe Demirel's olive groves in southwest Turkey lies a vast, grey expanse, stripped bare by a coal mine eating into the rolling hillside. On the horizon, heavy smoke billows from three giant chimneys of the power plant by the town of Yatagan. Determined to save her land and village, Demirel, a 64-year-old grandmother, has singlehandedly taken on the operators extending the mine to feed what is one of Turkey's largest power plants.

Last month, she won a court case against the expansion of the mine towards her village and, armed with information she herself uncovered from an earlier court ruling that said olive groves must be protected, she also won the appeal at the higher court. Her victory in court halted plans for mine expansion, but Demirel fears her six-acre property is being surrounded. "All the land around will be dug and plundered, and the olive grove will be stuck in the middle," she said. "I object. I will continue my struggle, and seek my rights. How am I supposed to come to my field? Land here from the sky with a helicopter?"

Five villages have already disappeared as mines serving the Yatagan power station have expanded, and Demirel's village of Turgut is now threatened. Across the province of Mugla 5,000 hectares, the equivalent of nearly 8,000 football fields, has been lost to mining in the last four decades, campaigners say.

Asked about its plans to expand the mine, Yatagan Power Plant told Reuters it has planted more than 1.5 million trees in the region and its operations respect the environment and are carried out under supervision of relevant Turkish ministries.

Limak, operating another plant in the region, told Reuters its production meets 5 percent of Turkey's power demand, with 1,050 mW installed capacity. The company added that its land purchasing practices were in line with laws and regulations.

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The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL), a European non-profit organisation measuring the impact of pollution estimates the healthcare costs of coal power generation in Turkey at up to 5.9 billion euros per year. Deniz Gumusel, environmental activist who co-authored a report on Turkey's coal power for HEAL, said three coal power plants in the region caused the death of 45,000 people in the more than 40 years since the first plant came online, mostly due to cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. "This is like war,

against people and against forests and ecosystems,” she said. But the determination of villagers and women like Demirel means there is still room for optimism, she insisted. “Women are carrying out an incredible fight against this unjust coal business. They were very successful in stopping or slowing down the progression of the mines.” Looking out from her fields of olives to the open pit mine, Demirel says that a few years earlier the area had been carpeted with tulips, poppies and daisies. “Which is better, a hell pit or nature?” she said.

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