

Residents of Greek villages in coal mining areas are at risk of displacement and contracting health issues.

The sun can barely be seen in the sky while driving through the outskirts of Ptolemaida, a city 500 kilometres northwest of Athens.

The thick dust suspended in the air doesn't allow you to see far but Kostas - a native of Ptolemaida - says he could drive here blindfolded.

"My father died of cancer when I was 12," he says, adding that four of his father's colleagues also died from the disease.

Kostas works as a guard for the state-run power company, the Greek Public Power Corporation, just like his father did.

Kostas' father was one of the many PPC workers who died prematurely due to pollution caused by coal mining in Ptolemaida, which lies in the Western Macedonia region of Greece. Despite strict EU regulations on coal and declining profits, Greece has just made an investment of 1.4bn euros (\$1.75bn) for the construction of two new plants in Ptolemaida. The post-apocalyptic landscape of Ptolemaida is made up of a sprawling black mine that spans 625 square miles and includes a few deserted villages. Ptolemaida's mine is the biggest in the Balkans and is responsible for 30 percent of the country's electricity production.

Greece, along with Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic, accounts for over a third of the world's coal production, one of the world's worst pollutants.

Burning coal creates toxic particles of fine dust that not only contaminate areas in which the plant is situated but travel hundreds of kilometres to neighbouring countries. According to Greenpeace's Silent Killers report, coal combustion causes more than 1,200 premature deaths in Greece.

In 2012 alone, the World Health Organization reported that 7 million people died as a result of exposure to air pollution.

In a letter to the Greek Ministry of Health, the deputy regional health manager for Western Macedonia mentioned that seven out of 10 deaths in Ptolemaida are due to cancer or thromboembolic disease (stroke, stroke, pulmonary embolism).

Cancer cases have risen by 16 percent since 1950 and life expectancy in the region has been shrinking.

At the same time, PPC and its partners have created 10,000 jobs for the residents of Western Macedonia, where unemployment during the financial crisis was the highest in Greece.

Many, like Kostas, sacrifice their health for as little as 680 euros (\$847) per month while

others have had to give up land and houses as they were engulfed by the expanding mines. Since 1976, more than 4,000 inhabitants of five different villages that sat on coal reserves have been internally displaced.

Half-demolished houses, a few hungry stray dogs, dilapidated churches: That's what's left of the village of Mavropigi, near Ptolemaida, today.

In 2010 the first excavation took place just 800 meters from the first houses in the village.

Since then, some have left the village in fear, and schools have closed permanently.

Aristokratis and his wife are two of Mavropigi's remaining 10 residents.

"I have my wife and my dogs here. I don't want to live anywhere else, this is my only home," says Aristokratis.

Source: aljazeera