

The heavy odour gives a hint of the tonnes of toxic waste including arsenic oxide left at a landfill site near where 400 children learn and play at a school in [North Macedonia](#).

A chromium and antimony mine in the village of Lojane was closed in 1979 and the waste was abandoned, left in the open air, polluting land and underground water supplies.

"I always tell my pupils not to approach this landfill," Afrim Zymberi, a geography teacher at the school told Reuters, covering his nose from the smell from the dump 100 metres away. "I call on the [government](#), please do something, it is very dangerous to have lessons here." The government says it is doing what it can while it tries to sell the waste, including planning to fence off the zone.

According to the World Health Organization, arsenic is one of 10 chemicals of major public health concern. It says long-term exposure from drinking water and food can cause cancer.

According to a 2007 report commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme, 1 million tonnes of waste material were at landfills in and near the village, with toxic concentrations of arsenic, antimony and other hazardous substances. This is no more recent data.

Some 5,000 tonnes are just a few meters away from the rail line where international trains go from Greece through North Macedonia and into the rest of Europe.

North Macedonia has identified 16 locations of [dangerous industrial waste](#) across the country.

Fence planned

When the country was part of former Yugoslavia there was little or no attention given to whether the waste harmed people's health. But now, as the Balkan nation aims to join the European Union, it has to do more to clean up its soil.

Lendita Dika, from the government's Industrial Pollution and Risk Management office, says the arsenic waste has not been removed because they are waiting for investors to buy it.

She says a Turkish company withdrew from a contract in 2022 due to a lack of economic interest, but a new tender will be opened soon as demand is renewed. Arsenic is used as an alloying agent and also to make glass, pigments, textiles, adhesives and pesticides, the WHO says.

In the meantime, the government plans to cordon off the area.

"In 2023 we will do a short-term solution and put a fence to stop people and pupils from entering inside the zone," Dika said.

There is no credible data on the effects on people's health but the 2007 report said the arsenic concentration in the soil and water was up to 50 times higher than permitted international standards.

"(The government should) immediately cover at least, and then to take measures like instructions not to use the water from the wells for drinking," Trajce Stafilov, a professor at the state Faculty of Natural Sciences in Skopje, said.

Located half kilometre from the border with Serbia, the majority of people in the village use water from wells to drink, and for their cattle or agriculture.

Pensioner Fatmir Selmani hopes a filter jug provides some protection as he draws water from the well near his house.

"The water has a better taste when it goes through this filter rather than without being filtered," Selmani said, Nasdaq writes.