

THE WORLD

In Karabakh, threat of renewed war is constant

Peace elusive between Armenians, Azerbaijanis 20 years after Soviet fall

BY WILL ENGLUND

STEPANAKERT, NAGORNO-KARABAKH — This is where the first war set off by the Soviet collapse took place. And it may be where the next one breaks out.

Twenty years ago, Armenians and Azerbaijanis, unleashed from Soviet control, waged a bitter struggle for this mountainous region in the South Caucasus. A cease-fire was reached in 1994, after about 30,000 people had been killed, leaving Nagorno-Karabakh outside Azerbaijan's control, as an unrecognized, de facto republic in the hands of ethnic Armenians.

Since then, no one on either side has had the will to hammer out a settlement. Tension has been put to use by those in power — in Azerbaijan, in Armenia proper and here in separatist Nagorno-Karabakh. Democracy, human rights, an unfettered press, a genuine opposition — these are the sorts of things that get put aside in times of crisis. And here, the crisis has been going on for two decades and shows little sign of letting up.

"The development of democracy has fallen hostage to the conflict," said Masis Mayilian, Nagorno-Karabakh's former foreign minister and a onetime candidate for president. "This is very handy for totalitarian regimes."

A renewal of the war would be a disaster for all concerned, unless it were very quick. On this they agree. The two sides are much more heavily armed than they were in 1991, especially Azerbaijan. It might be very difficult for Iran, Turkey and Russia to remain uninvolved — and impossible to confine the fighting to Nagorno-Karabakh itself. A major supply route used by the United States to provision troops in Afghanistan would be disrupted.

But resistance to a peace settlement along the lines of a proposal sponsored by the United States, France and Russia has been stiff. "We share the wish that there be no war," said Robert Bradtke, the U.S. diplomat involved in the talks. "But do the parties have the political will?"

So far, they don't. Azerbaijan and Armenia, which negotiates on behalf of Nagorno-Karabakh, say they support the international effort to find a way toward settling the first post-Soviet conflict. "It is high time to do it," Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mamedyarov said recently in Moscow after meeting with his counterpart from Russia, which is especially intent on getting an agreement.

But Azerbaijan also says that it will never formally surrender territory. And the people of Nagorno-Karabakh say they will never give up the right of self-determination. For two decades, both sides have kept passions inflamed, which turns out to be good politics for those at the top.

But with snipers on both sides shooting at one another every day, occasionally causing casualties, and plenty of saber-rattling rhetoric, the chances of stumbling into a war of miscalculation, or a war of hotheadedness, are considerable.



PHOTOS BY WILL ENGLUND/THE WASHINGTON POST

Children play on a tank that serves as a memorial to the 1992 assault on the town of Shushi, considered a signal Armenian victory in the war with Azerbaijan over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. A cease-fire was reached in 1994, leaving the region outside the control of Azerbaijan.



Sisters Anna, 7, and Maria Khachatryan, 8, wait for other members of their family to light candles at the St. John the Baptist Cathedral in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenian kingdom, in A.D. 301, became the first to adopt Christianity as its official religion.

Tevan Poghosyan, who in the 1990s represented Karabakh in the United States and now runs a think tank in Yerevan, Armenia's capital, said war is inevitable. It will take another round of fighting, he said, to "steam" the poison out.

'We had nothing'

In the Soviet era, boundaries were often drawn with little regard for the huge mix of nationalities that populated the U.S.S.R. Some ethnic groups were split; others were paired with traditionally hostile neighbors. Much of this was done intentionally, as a way of assuring Moscow's control. As the country was falling apart,

people were quick to take up arms against one another. Difficulties and ill will linger: between Georgians and Abkhazians; between Georgians and Ossetians, who fought a brief renewed war in 2008; and between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, who clashed violently a year ago.

The war here was the largest such conflict. Both sides put forward intricate historical claims to the region. Azerbaijan says a million Azerbaijanis fled their homes in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. As many as 500,000 Armenians reportedly fled from Azerbaijan. Neither side has fully tried to integrate those people into society, and the subject remains,



LARIS KARKLIS/THE WASHINGTON POST

from politicians' point of view, a useful sore point.

Nagorno-Karabakh has a population that has been variously estimated at between 90,000 and 145,000. Seventeen years into its life as a de facto state, it harbors a prickly and zealous society.

"We had nothing, and out of nothing we created something," said Galya Arstamyanyan, whose son Grigory left the Soviet army so he could return home to fight. He was killed. Today she runs a museum dedicated to those who died. "We will live and prove to the world that Karabakh is the heart of the Armenian nation and the spirit of the Armenian nation. The land on which we live has become sacred from the blood of our martyrs. We are not recognized, but we are still here. We ask nothing from the world."

The Armenian kingdom was the first to adopt Christianity as its official religion, in 301, and Azerbaijanis are Muslims, though both sides like to play down the religious divide. (Iran favors Armenia, for one thing.) Yet Armenians marked their tanks with white crosses. And at the mountaintop Gandzasar Monastery, where the St. John the Baptist Cathedral was consecrated in 1240, there is a regular liturgy for the "martyrs" of the war.

"The strongest thing that keeps us here is our faith," Prime Minister Ara Harutyunyan said. Then, using the Armenian name for Karabakh — Artsakh — he invoked a prophet who is a major figure in both Christianity and Islam. "In Artsakh, we have 70,000 Abrahams. We fully realize our children can become sacrifices any day. But we still live here, still give birth to children. And we think this is the main guarantee of our security."

Today's teenagers, unlike their parents, never lived in the Soviet Union and have never lived among Azerbaijanis, whom they have been taught to see as two-dimensional villains. For the past few years, a handful of young people from both sides have gotten together for several days in neutral Georgia, in a program run by David Melkumyan of the YMCA here. It's a shock, he said, for them to discover how much they have in common.

"But nobody wants to work with us," Melkumyan said. "Not one donor."

A complicated picture

Among older Karabakhis, who remember things the way they once were, the picture can be

more complicated. Ashot Harutyunyan saw who benefited from the first war. He's a farmworker, in the fertile valley that leads northward from Stepanakert. Harutyunyan fought in the 1990s — he points out a ridge that his partisan band held, just to the east — because he figured it was a question then of fighting or dying. Today he has a job on a privatized farm, with an absentee owner, that he said pays him about \$8 a day. It's not enough to support a family.

"We're simple people. We leave politics to the politicians. If there's another war, the poor people, of course, will fight. The rich will fly away," he said.

He thinks back to 1987, and life in the Soviet Union, when Moscow still kept a tight grip and none of this conflict and upheaval had broken out. "Everyone had a job. There was enough money to survive. Of course it was better then."

Potential for escalation

Here in Stepanakert, officials say they are confident that they have the military strength to keep Azerbaijan from attacking and that that's a better way to keep the peace than by making concessions toward a settlement.

Yet this is a peace where the two sides have no communication with each other across the cease-fire line, where at one location they are entrenched within 30 yards of each other and where they regularly take casualties. A blunder could escalate.

And, at the same time, there's a growing suspicion among some Armenians that a "military solution" might, after all, be possible, Giragosyan said.

"It may take another war to settle this, for both sides to exhaust this, and that's scary," Giragosyan said.

Armenia's foreign minister, Edward Nalbandian, called the idea of going back to war "very dangerous." He said it will "bring no solution but new casualties and devastations."

Farmworkers and their children are, in fact, still being killed and maimed — by land mines and cluster bombs left over from the first war. A nonprofit group called the Halo Trust has been at work for years clearing them out, but there's more to be done. Every time the price of wheat goes up, casualties increase, as farmers venture into fallow fields to try to plant more crops, said Nick Smart, the program manager. More than 300 people have been wounded or killed since 1995.

Most of the money for the mine clearance comes from the U.S. government, with a \$1 million contribution planned for 2012. The Karabakh government doesn't help because it has other priorities, said Georgy Petrosyan, the foreign minister. The mines and bombs were mostly left by Armenian forces, but Smart said that getting in touch with Armenian officers for help in mapping the minefields has been frustratingly difficult.

The other problem, he said, is that no one wants to spend money on the program if the whole area is about to go back to war.

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DIGEST

SYRIA Soldiers kill 11 people in western town

The Syrian army fatally shot 11 people in a western town near the Lebanese border Thursday and stormed a northwestern town near the Turkish border, activists said.

The shooting in the western town of Qusair also wounded many, according to Syrian human rights and activists groups. Anti-government demonstrations are common in Qusair, and the shooting there, combined with the early morning assault on the northwestern town of Saraqeb, reflected President Bashar al-Assad's determination to crush Syria's nearly five-month-old uprising despite mounting international condemnation.

The White House said President Obama spoke with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Thursday to underscore his deep concern about the Syrian government's use of violence against civilians.

It said the two agreed that the violence in Syria must stop and that the demands of the Syrian

people for a transition to democracy must be met. Obama and Erdogan agreed to consult closely on the situation in the coming days.

— Associated Press

PAKISTAN Twin blasts target police in northwest

A teenage girl wearing an explosives-laden vest and a woman attacked Pakistani police officers guarding the scene of a blast in the northwest Thursday, twin strikes that killed five people and broke a relative lull in militant violence in the country.

In the first attack, a remote-controlled bomb exploded in Peshawar's Lahori Gate area as a police truck drove by. Four police officers and a boy passing by were killed, while 22 people were wounded.

An hour later, a woman and a girl who appeared to be 16 or 17 approached police officers guarding the area. The girl threw a grenade, then was able to partially detonate her suicide vest, police said. Both attackers died in the blast.

Islamist extremists with links to al-Qaeda have waged a bloody campaign against Pakistan's government since 2007, striking police, government and Western targets. As many as 35,000 people have been killed, raising fears abroad about the stability of the nuclear-armed nation.

— Associated Press

LIBYA Rebels claim victory in strategic oil city

Libyan rebels battling Moammar Gaddafi's troops along their country's Mediterranean coast said they captured a key oil hub Thursday after three weeks of hand-to-hand fighting.

Rebel spokesman Mohammed al-Rijali said he was with the fighters in Brega when they gained control of the port city, more than 100 miles southwest of the rebel capital, Benghazi.

"Brega is liberated," he said after nightfall, speaking by phone from nearby Ajdabiya.

Rijali's assertion could not be verified. Brega's capture would be an important boost for the rebels be-

cause whoever controls the strategic terminal is in charge of Libya's main oil fields.

— Associated Press

NIGERIA Pfizer begins payouts in fatal drug study

Drugmaker Pfizer says it has begun paying victims and their families affected by its fatal 1996 meningitis study in northern Nigeria.

Nigeria's government and the New York-based pharmaceutical company announced a \$75 million settlement in 2009. On Thursday, the company announced that it has made a \$175,000 payment to the families of four children who died.

In 1996, Pfizer treated 100 meningitis-infected children with an experimental antibiotic called Trovan. Eleven children died during the clinical trial, performed amid an outbreak of the disease.

Lawsuits filed against the company alleged that some children received a dose lower than recommended, leaving many with brain damage, paralysis or

slurred speech.

Pfizer denied the charges.

— Associated Press

CHINA More steps taken to slow bullet trains

China is to suspend approvals of new high-speed rail lines after a fatal crash last month that fueled concerns about the advanced network, officials said.

The State Council, or cabinet, has also decided to cut most bullet trains' top speed from 217 to 186 miles per hour and to reevaluate safety systems on unbuilt projects. On Wednesday, the Railway Ministry halted production of some bullet trains.

— Financial Times

Tehran street named for U.S. activist killed in Gaza: Tehran's municipal council has named a street after a 23-year-old American activist who was crushed to death by an Israeli military bulldozer in the Gaza Strip in 2003. A report in the Hamsahri daily said that the street named for Rachel Aliene Corrie is in central Tehran, though the sign is not in

place. Iran does not recognize Israel and supports the Palestinians.

Pyongyang open to family reunions for Korean Americans

North Korea says it is considering allowing Korean Americans to be reunited with their separated families in the North. A North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman said that the United States recently proposed discussing the issue through Red Cross and other channels and said such an exchange would help boost confidence between the countries.

Lebanon tells court it can't make arrests

Lebanese authorities informed the special court in the Netherlands investigating the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri that they are unable to arrest four suspects, all members of the militant Shiite group Hezbollah, or serve them with their indictments. The court president appealed to the four men to hire lawyers and turn themselves in — or at least make themselves available by video link to participate in their trial.

— From news services