

Armenia: Murder Case Strains Relations with Moscow

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Mass protests held over Yerevan's failure to try Russian suspect in an Armenian court.

Armenians in the capital Yerevan and the northwestern city of Gyumri have reacted angrily after the national authorities failed to act against a Russian serviceman accused of carrying out a brutal gun massacre.

Instead, the suspect, Private Valery Permyakov, was taken into custody at the Russian army base where he was deployed, and the military authorities there are now investigating the crime.

The Armenian authorities' reluctance to investigate themselves and put the suspect on trial in a domestic court has been criticised by the national ombudsman and has led to public protests in Yerevan and in Gyumri, where the attack took place.

According to Armenia's Investigative Committee, Private Permyakov, a Russian soldier deployed at the 102nd Russian base in Gyumri, has pleaded guilty to killing seven members of a single family in an attack on January 12. His victims included a two-year-old girl and a six-month old boy; the latter initially survived but died from his injuries in hospital on January 19.

Police found an AK-74 rifle along with 21 cartridges at the crime scene. They also found a pair of soldiers' boots marked with Permyakov's name.

According to Raffi Aslanian, prosecutor for the Shirak region where Gyumri is located, Russian border guards detained Permyakov on January 12 as he tried to cross the border into Turkey, about 15 kilometres away from Gyumri. The suspect was then handed over to the Russian military authorities at the base, where he is in custody.

The move has caused serious discontent among Armenians, particularly in Gyumri, as people feel the Russians behaved in a high-handed manner, and Permyakov should instead have been prosecuted under domestic law since he was off the base.

Some argue that allowing him to be handed over to Russian custody was a breach of Armenian law and also of a bilateral arrangement between the two countries. The border with Turkey is manned by border guards from both Armenia and Russia. However, under a 1992 agreement, suspected criminals picked up at the border should be handed to Armenian law enforcement agencies.

There was therefore some surprise when a statement issued by the prosecutor general's office on January 13 said that the authorities had not discussed investigating Permyakov under Armenian law. The statement said the reason was that the suspect was "a citizen of the Russian Federation and under the jurisdiction of Russian law enforcement agencies". It cited article 61, paragraph 1 of the Russian constitution which prohibits the extradition of Russian nationals to other states.

Lawyers in Armenia, as well as the country's ombudsman Karen Andreasyan, have criticised the national authorities and say there are no legal grounds for the Russian military to take custody of Permyakov and investigate the case.

"The fact that the murder was committed on Armenian territory and the victims of the crime were Armenian gives grounds to say that under international law, under the Armenian-Russian intergovernmental agreement, and under the constitution and legislation of Armenia, the investigation of the case should be conducted by the law enforcement and judicial authorities of Armenia," Andreasyan said. "The suspect must be handed over to the Armenian authorities."

Vahagn Dallakyan, a lawyer who works for the Yerevan Investment Law Group, highlighted a 1997 agreement governing the Russian military base in Gyumri. "Article 4 clearly states that the investigation of crimes committed by persons who are members of the Russian military base in Armenia falls under the jurisdiction of Armenia's law enforcement agencies and under Armenian legislation," he said.

The Armenian authorities' handling of the case has led to demonstrations in Gyumri and Yerevan on January 14 and 15. About 30 protesters and police were taken to hospital following clashes. Police also had to deploy in large numbers at the military base and at Moscow's consulate in Gyumri and embassy in Yerevan.

Armenia's prosecutor general, Gevorg Kostanyan, rushed to Gyumri to meet the protesters. As demonstrators hurled coins, Kostanyan promised them that he would appeal to Russia's chief prosecutor to

get the case and the suspect himself transferred to Armenian jurisdiction.

Besides the issue of whether Armenia or Russia should investigate and prosecute the case, there are also concerns about local efforts to pursue the suspect immediately after the crime took place.

A photograph of Permyakov published by the media the same morning quickly circulated online. Yet despite a large-scale manhunt mounted by Armenian police and security services, he managed to elude them for about 12 hours. In doing so he walked about 15 kilometres in freezing temperatures of minus 14 degrees. The Armenian authorities have yet to comment on how he did this.

More broadly, many Armenians feel the incident showed that the national authorities were being dictated to by Moscow and, as such, marks a shift in the former Soviet state's relationship with Russia.

The chairman of the Helsinki Committee of Armenia, Avetik Ishkhanyan, disputes the official account of events in Gyumri. He believes Permyakov may have been picked up by the Armenian police and then handed over to Russian forces.

"I don't trust the official statement, so it is even possible that the Armenians arrested him and handed him over to his Russian base," Ishkhanyan said.

Ishkhanyan noted that Russia's deputy defence minister, Arkady Bakhin, visited Armenia on January 13, the day after the incident. He sees this as an attempt to put pressure on Yerevan.

Russia is a longstanding ally of Armenia, supplying most of its gas as well as maintaining a military presence there. Given the traditionally cordial relationship, one might have expected the Permyakov incident to have been resolved amicably. But a number of factors have soured perceptions of Russia. Many Armenians were outraged when it emerged in 2013-14 that the Russian arms industry was selling tanks and other hi-tech military equipment to Azerbaijan, a country with which they are still technically at war, even though the Nagorny Karabakh conflict ended in a truce 20 years ago. (See **Yerevan Angry at Russian Arms Sales to Baku.**)

Then there is the change in Russia's own circumstances. Armenia entered the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Eurasian Economic Union at the beginning of January, but much of its trade is with European states and it has no wish to share in Moscow's increasing isolation, a result of its actions in Ukraine. The deepening economic crisis in Russia has also had a direct impact on the large numbers of Armenians working there, cutting the value of the money they send home and reducing the numbers of jobs on offer to foreign migrants. (See **Armenian Economy Hit by Knock-on Effects of Russia Sanctions.**)

Ruben Mehrabyan, an expert at the Armenian Centre for Political and International Studies, is concerned that Yerevan has acquiesced to Moscow over the incident. He points out that President Serzh Sargsyan did not declare an official day of mourning, and waited a whole week to offer his condolences to the victims' relatives – after Russian president Vladimir Putin had done so.

"Armenia has become hostage to Russia," Mehrabyan said. "In the short term, what happened may not affect Armenian-Russian relations, but looking at it in the long term, it marks the beginning of a process of reviewing the relationship.

"We are not a province of Russia, but the current Russian elite does not understand that."

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