

Armenia Stands Firm on Eurovision Boycott

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Country will not be represented at event in Azerbaijan even though incident that sparked outrage turns out not to be true.

Armenia has withdrawn from this year's Eurovision Song Contest in Azerbaijan, following the death of a soldier that was initially blamed on Azeri troops.

The boycott will stay in place even though it transpires that the soldier was killed by one of his comrades rather than by an Azerbaijani sniper.

The contest is organised by the European Broadcast Union, EBU, which issued a statement on March 7 announcing the withdrawal of Armenian Public Television as a participating member.

"We are truly disappointed by the broadcaster's decision," contest chief Jon Ola Sand said in the statement. "Despite the efforts of the EBU and the [Azerbaijani] host broadcaster to ensure a smooth participation for the Armenian delegation in this year's contest, circumstances beyond our control led to this unfortunate decision."

Pressure for a boycott had been growing for some time in Armenia.

The immediate cause was an Armenian defence ministry statement on February 23 that Private Albert Adibekyan had been killed by a sniper firing from inside Azerbaijan.

The following day, an open letter written in the name of 22 musicians started circulating in the media.

"We refuse to perform in a country known for its mass pogroms against Armenians. We refuse to perform in a country where hatred of Armenians has become state policy. We refuse to perform in a country which people of Armenian ethnicity are barred from visiting, even if they are citizens of another country," the letter said.

The letter did not bear the signatures of the musicians named, and it was uncertain whether they had initiated it.

"No one signed any letter," well-known singer Alla Levonyan said a famous Armenian singer. "We all received calls from Public Television and asked whether we were for or against it [participation]. I was against."

The story became even more confused on March 5 when officials admitted that Private Adibekyan was killed by another Armenian soldier under unexplained circumstances, so he had not been hit by an Azerbaijani sniper after all.

Despite this, performers continued demanding a boycott of Eurovision.

"This [shooting] incident is not relevant to my position. Azerbaijan breaks the ceasefire and takes our soldiers' lives on a regular basis. I was opposed to our taking part from the outset," Levonyan said. "What would we show or prove by going there?... We are enemies, so why should we indicate that we mean them well?"

Relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan remain tense two decades after the conflict over Nagorny Karabakh, which ended in 1994 with an Armenian administration in control of the separatist entity. A formal peace deal remains far off.

Many other singers agreed, like Aramo, who said it would be wrong to perform in a city where Armenians had been victims of ethnic violence in the past.

However, members of the Dorians group which was widely tipped to represent Armenia in the competition were disappointed they would not be going.

"I cannot see a reason why Armenia should not take part in Eurovision," the band's producer Vahagn Gevorgyan said, accusing Armenian Public Television of engineering a campaign to withdraw.

"The letter demanding a Eurovision boycott was written not by the performers but by Public Television. It used them to articulate its own view," he said.

Officials at Armenian Public Television deny instigating the letter or provoking a boycott by performers.

Armenia has taken part in the Eurovision Song Contest since 2006, and its highest-place entry was in 2008 when it took fourth place. Last year, its contestant Emmy did not make it past the semi-finals.

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