

Army Abuse Claims In Azerbaijan

Author: [Jasur Mamedov](#)

Questions asked about whether bullying in the Azerbaijani army prompted three soldiers to cross the front line.

The strange case of an army sergeant who allegedly gave himself up to Armenian forces has sparked a row about discipline and abuses inside Azerbaijan's army, with a rise in recorded cases of bullying and suicide.

Twenty-year-old Samir Mamedov was taken prisoner by Armenian forces on December 24 last year on the border between Gazakh district in north-western Azerbaijan and Ijevan in Armenia.

Armenian and Azerbaijani soldiers face each other on stretches of their common frontier, as well as along the long ceasefire line that surrounds the disputed territory of Nagorny Karabakh.

In January, the head of the working group of Armenia's state commission for captives, hostages and missing-in-action, Armen Kaprielian announced that Mamedov did not wish to return to Azerbaijan.

"Samir Mamedov deliberately crossed the state frontier and surrendered voluntarily," Kaprielian told local media. "He was not taken prisoner, as Azerbaijani sources have claimed."

Armenian defence ministry spokesman Seiran Shakhshuvian said that Mamedov had complained he was being beaten and humiliated by army officers. Armenian media reported that the soldier wanted to move to a third country, perhaps Norway.

Azerbaijan's defence ministry has strongly rejected these allegations.

Spokesman Ilgar Verdiev told IWPR that they were complete invention, "In all our experience, we have not encountered any case where Azerbaijani soldiers have voluntarily surrendered and ended up in Armenian captivity."

However, this is not the only case in the last three months in which Azerbaijani soldiers have ended up in Armenian captivity in disputed circumstances. On December 7, Vusal Garajayev was taken prisoner by Karabakh Armenian forces in the Aghdam region. The Karabakh Armenians later said that he had crossed the line of his own accord after being beaten up by fellow-soldiers.

On December 31, another soldier, Eldeniz Nuriev, was taken prisoner on the Gazakh-Ijevan border.

Both men later returned home after mediation by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

At first, the Azerbaijani defence ministry said that Garajayev and Nuriev had both got lost in foggy conditions. But they have been arrested, and are facing charges of treason and abandoning their post.

During the criminal investigation into the case, it emerged that Garajayev had been beaten up in his unit.

Military expert Lieutenant-Colonel Uzeir Jafarov said it was illogical to accuse soldiers of treason if they had in fact been taken prisoner.

“The commanders of the defence ministry are just being arrogant and they thought up these accusations to shirk their own responsibilities,” he told IWPR. “In the first place, what does the defence ministry think it’s doing if soldiers are wandering freely around a mined battlefield and end up on the Armenian side?... Accusing captive soldiers of treason is an insult not just to the military but to the whole Azerbaijani nation.”

At the same time, Jafarov said cases of abuse in the armed forces were common.

“Why are commanders who subject their soldiers to violence not brought to account? There have been about 200 cases in the military in the last year alone, most of them relating to corruption or violence against soldiers,” he said.

Jafarov said the arrest of the two men was probably a major reason why Mamedov did not want to return to Azerbaijan.

According to data collected by Doktrina, a centre for journalistic investigations, in previous years 60-70 per cent of casualties in the army had direct military causes, such as shooting across the frontline and mine explosions, but in the last year 75 per cent of casualties were caused by non-battlefield incidents. The centre says this shows a rise in the number of suicides and cases of bullying.

The centre noted that 30 Azerbaijani officers, including several colonels, have been arrested on corruption charges in the last three months.

In another high-profile case, two high-ranking Azerbaijani officers have gone on hunger strike after whistleblowing. Lieutenant-Colonel Azer Gasymov began his protest after he complained about wrongdoing in the defence ministry, and was transferred from his unit in Baku to distant Nakhichevan, demoted and had his pay cut in half.

Another lieutenant-colonel, Rasim Muradov, who had been deputy commander of Azerbaijan’s peacekeeping forces, began his hunger strike after he too was transferred to Nakhichevan when he complained about corruption among Azerbaijani peacekeepers in Iraq, Kosovo and Afghanistan.

The spate of allegations about abuses in the army prompted Azerbaijan’s human rights ombudsman Elmira Suleimanova to file a letter of enquiry to the defence ministry.

“We appealed to the defence minister in connection with the imprisonment and persecution of soldiers,” Suleimanova told IWPR. “In the letter, we expressed our wish to look into the incidents that have occurred and pay increased attention to discipline in military units.”

Experts say that the heightened attention to issues of abuse and corruption in the Azerbaijani army is linked to Azerbaijan's efforts to implement its Individual Partnership Action Plan or IPAP with NATO in 2007. As a result, the military prosecutor's office and the national security minister are now investigating the army more closely.

Samir Mamedov's family hopes that he will return home soon. They are in regular contact with the Red Cross, which has met him 12 times and delivered three letters from him to his loved ones.

In a letter home, Mamedov wrote, "Forget about me and don't worry. It seems this is just how my fate has turned out."

But his family insist this letter must have been written under pressure. The captive soldier's uncle Vidali Mamedov said, "My nephew loves his homeland very much. It's quite possible that they put psychological pressure on Samir."

Azerbaijan's state committee for prisoners and missing-in-action told IWPR that it would be possible to find out whether Mamedov had been put under undue pressure only when he returned home. The Red Cross said it could not comment on the matter as it was acting as an impartial mediator.

Jasur Mamedov is a military commentator with Aina-Zerkalo newspaper in Baku.

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