

Azerbaijan: Kurds Targeted Again

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Thousands of Kurds forced to leave Nagorny Karabakh a decade ago find themselves under threat once more.

Aligismet Jabbarov never thought he would have to leave his hometown of Lachin in western Azerbaijan, where he worked as a restaurant inspector.

But soon after his second child was born in 1992, Armenian forces attacked Lachin - a finger of land separating Nagorny Karabakh from Armenia - and his family abandoned their home and all their possessions, joining thousands of other Kurds in their exodus to the east of the country.

"We got as far as Agjabedin district, where they placed us in a dormitory. Locals brought us clothing. Three years ago they built some 300 single-story homes for refugees in Takhta-Kerpu village nearby, and we moved in," recalled Aligismet.

On April 2, the Kurdish refugees marked the tenth anniversary of their exodus - an event made all the more distressing by media demands for an investigation into alleged links between members of the community and the extremist Kurdish Labour Party.

Azerbaijani Kurds have always lived in close-knit communities - mostly in the districts of Kelbajar, Lachin, Zangelan and Gubadlin - located close to the epicentre of Karabakh conflict and now controlled by Armenia.

"On March 27, 1993, the Armenians attacked Kelbajar from three directions," recalled Shamil Askerov, the seventy-three-year-old former director of the Kurdish Museum in Kelbajar. "They were firing Grad rocket launchers on us. The only escape route was a narrow mountain path across the Murovdag ridge. Adults, seniors and children set out walking across the mountains in the snow and the sleet."

There were some 41,000 Kurds in Azerbaijan during the Soviet era. According to Arab chronicles, the first Kurdish settlements appeared in these parts in the 7th century AD, but mass migration began in the late 16th century, when Shah Abbas of Iran sent 24 Kurdish tribes here from western Iran to guard the empire's north-western frontier.

Local Kurds had always been on good terms with the Azerbaijani majority. But now that they are scattered across the country's 60 municipalities, they feel more estranged and on their own.

A Kurdish radio station, newspaper and numerous schools attempt to keep Kurdish culture alive, but fewer families bother to teach their mother tongue to their children anymore. Askerov, who travels around Kurdish communities a lot, has observed that more than 50 per cent of families speak Azerbaijani to each other.

"My father told me our ancestors moved to Karabakh from Iranian Kurdistan about 200 years ago, when they all spoke Farsi. Now we all speak Azerbaijani. There's nothing wrong with that as long as no one forces us to learn it," said Adaliat Khashimov.

Coming to terms with life as refugees has been hard, but it seems the Kurds' troubles are far from over. Over the past few months, there have been reports in the Azerbaijani opposition press linking some of their community with the Kurdish Labour Party.

The National Security Ministry has not taken the reports seriously, saying that 32 people have been arrested on suspicion of such links over the past ten years, with the last detention in 2001.

Kamil Gasanov, director of the Kurdish Culture Centre in Baku, insists the accusations are unfounded. "This is just a side-effect of the political struggle between opposition parties. They even accuse our culture centre of terrorism in their papers," Gasanov told IWPR.

Independent analysts believe the controversial media reports started appearing with the start of the Iraqi war when Turkey - Azerbaijan's historic ally - considered deploying its troops in Iraq's northern Kurdish-controlled provinces.

They say tensions may also have been raised by worries about a possible influx of Kurdish refugees from northern Iraq. But the fears have proved to be misplaced, as only several hundred are reported to have arrived in recent months, many of them heading for Baku, hoping to eventually move to the West.

Meanwhile, Askerov believes the best way to handle the current difficulties is to mind your own business. He has sought to rebuild the Karabakh museum in Baku, so far collecting 4,000 items, donated by other Kurds, and is preparing a Kurdish ethnography exhibition for early May.

"Two of our exhibits are rarities of international significance. These bronze totems depicting a goat and a wolf are 4,000 years old and priceless," he said.

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