

Azerbaijan: No Glory for Veterans

Author: [Mamed Suleimanov](#)

Former combatants struggle to survive, and veteran status offers little solace or practical help.

Rahim volunteered to go to the front in the war against the Armenians in 1992, when he was 23. In January 1993, he was wounded and taken prisoner near the town of Fizuli.

Eleven years on, Rahim is reluctant to talk about his time as a prisoner-of-war. "I've told this story so many times to the state commission on prisoners, so go and talk to them," he told IWPR.

But over a cup of tea, he relented and agreed to tell his story.

"I spent more than a year in captivity. For about a month they kept me behind bars next to another Azeri man called Oktay. Then I ended up in the family of an Armenian man whose son had also been taken prisoner. I spent many long months in the countryside around Hadrut, in this man's house. His name was Kamo. They treated me much better there."

After more than a year in captivity, Rahim's family managed to win his freedom after paying a ransom. He was exchanged for a body of an Armenian plus some money. He declined to say how much money changed hands, but said that it was the intermediary who kept it anyway - a field commander nicknamed Fantomas, a former tractor driver who spent the war involved more in the "business" of trading prisoners than in the actual fighting.

Rahim returned an invalid to the small town of Zakatala in north-western Azerbaijan where he lives. Even though he cannot move the fingers on his left hand because of war wounds, he managed to become a professional hairdresser.

The local authorities gave him a small room in a local hotel, which he turned into a hairdressing salon. Then his luck turned sour again. Survivors of a fire in an apartment block were re-housed in the hotel, so Rahim lost his means of making a livelihood.

Now Rahim is unemployed. He has a family and three children, but no house and nowhere to turn to for help. The town authorities have long forgotten about him, and now he is saving up to move to Russia, where he hopes he can find a job as a market trader.

Another veteran, 38-year-old Azer, had more luck. He too volunteered for the war, serving as a driver ferrying ammunition to the front. He was badly wounded by a landmine in Aghdam, and spent over a month in intensive care. Twelve years later, he still gets bad headaches from the skull injury he suffered.

After he left hospital, Azer managed to get a fairly lucrative job by local standards, working at a customs checkpoint on the border with Georgia. He says that to avoid standing out from his colleagues, he took bribes and shared them with his superiors, just like the other customs officers.

After ten years on the job, he managed to save up a decent sum, got married, bought a house in Baku and started his own business. But a year ago he was sacked from customs because, he says, "they sold my workplace to someone else".

The stories of both Rahim and Azer illustrate how Azerbaijan's veterans of the Nagorny Karabakh war have had to fend for themselves in the 10 years since the ceasefire agreement of 1994. Most say they are ignored by the state they fought for, and that they survive only on their wits.

Recently a local television channel reported that a war invalid from the town of Imishli has been living with his wife and children in an old bus for three years, because he lost hope that he would ever be able to get a proper home.

The primary concern for most veterans is feeding their families. The pension for invalids from the war is about 27 dollars a month, well below the bread line.

Veterans used to enjoy some benefits, travelling free on public transport and receiving gas and electricity supplies for nothing. However, former Azerbaijani president Heidar Aliiev cut those benefits from the beginning of 2002.

Rei Kerimoglu, a spokesman for the Karabakh Gazileri (Karabakh Warriors) organisation, one of several veterans' groups, told IWPR that benefits for invalids are sometimes misappropriated. For instance, specially-adapted vehicles should be provided to invalids free of charge, but officials demand a bribe of 300 to 400 dollars to hand them over.

Kerimoglu said that in recent years, abject poverty has driven 36 war invalids to kill themselves, and 75 more have been treated by doctors after attempting suicide.

Mekhti Mekhtiev, chairman of the Public Union of Karabakh War Invalids, Veterans and Families of Martyrs' Families, told IWPR, "We have been facing a difficult situation since our benefits were cut. When Baku mayor Hajibala Abutalibov had illegally-built structures demolished, some trading booths belonging to Karabakh veterans also got destroyed. These people are unable to work due to their health, and trading is their only source of income. Now many veterans are simply starving."

Labour and welfare minister Nagiev denies that veterans are being neglected. He said the 8,000 Karabakh war invalids on his ministry's books get priority treatment from the state. "Compared with others, they have much higher pensions, they receive free medical treatment at home, and those who need to have treatment abroad are given a certain amount of money every year," he said. The minister said the state has handed out nearly 800 cars and 350 apartments to veterans free of charge since 1997.

Altay Mamedov, who heads the Azerbaijani Association for Veterans of the Great Patriotic War, an organisation originally set up to help Second World War participants, said part of the problem is that there are so many different veterans' groups.

"In other countries there is one centralised body that deals with all the problems facing veterans. But we have nine state organisations doing it, and as a result there are differing interpretations of the criteria for granting veteran status, and varying numbers of veterans are cited," said Mamedov. "The state claims there are 74,000 veterans of the Karabakh war in the country. But our data indicates that the number of war veterans is exaggerated. Our association is proposing to unite all organisations that [have the power to] grant veteran status."

Neither Rahim nor Azer is a member of any of the veterans' organisations.

"It's all politics, and the heads of all those organisations just want to grab a piece of the pie," said Rahim. Azer agreed, saying, "If you hang around waiting for help from the state, you could easily starve to death."

Neither man likes reminiscing about the war, and they do not take part in army reunions. The memories of what they did then are a burden they carry alone.

Mamed Suleimanov is a reporter for the Baku newspaper Novoe Vremya.

Location: Stavropol
Russia
North Ossetia
Karabakh

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/azerbaijan-no-glory-veterans>