

Azerbaijan: Rebel Village Hit by New Crackdown

Police raid village that was at the centre of anti-Aliev protests last year

The dissident village of Nardaran, on Azerbaijan's Caspian Sea coast, is again in the eye of a political storm after a violent police operation against local demonstrators.

Early in the morning of February 5, 200 armed and masked policemen poured into the centre of the village and forcibly removed the protestors, camped out in the centre of the village.

Seventeen villagers said they were injured and eight were arrested in the pre-dawn raid on a tent encampment, where protestors had been sleeping as part of an ongoing campaign of opposition to Azerbaijani's governing regime. Eleven men from the village are on trial in Baku, accused of plotting to overthrow the government, following disturbances, which took place in Nardaran last June.

The police said the aim of the latest raid was to detain suspected criminals. Human rights activists and people in the village itself, 30 km north of Baku, called it a new act of repression against residents that have dared voice protest against the government of President Heidar Aliiev.

Witnesses told a journalist from Turan news agency and human rights activist Leila Yunus that the police first used smoke canisters and tear gas and then burst from all sides into the village's central square, where protestors were camping out. When the armed police met resistance they opened fire and beat the demonstrators with truncheons and rifle butts.

"Four men attacked me, started to beat me with the butt of an automatic weapon and spray my face with an aerosol can," Abdulkarim Nuriev, one of the villagers told Turan. "I lost a lot of blood. They dragged me for several metres across the asphalt. But when they saw a crowd of villagers, they dropped me and ran. The attackers were wearing camouflage and masks."

The press office of Azerbaijan's interior ministry justified the February 5 raid by saying that it wanted to detain several wanted and dangerous men who were still at large. One of these, Hamid Yakhshibekov, allegedly refused to surrender and ordered others to take the policemen hostage. The protestors then opened fire and threw a grenade, wounding one policeman, the ministry said.

Azerbaijani state television news later showed weapons and ammunition the police had allegedly confiscated in Nardaran - the same charge as the authorities made last summer. The government also accuses Nardaran, which has a famous Shiite shrine, of being a centre of Islamic extremism.

The villagers deny these charges, saying that they have only ever protested peacefully and the police attacked them first.

Leila Yunus, the well-known human rights activist who heads Baku's Institute of Peace and Democracy, visited the village the morning after the latest bout of violence. She told IWPR the official version of events does not stand up.

"There is no way that the sleeping villagers could have taken armed policemen hostage," Yunus said. She said that she had found no proof that the Nardaranis had been armed and that the police, far from trying

to arrest wanted men, had rounded up everyone in sight and then let one of the alleged "wanted men" go.

"All these policemen carried out a punitive operation in the village of Nardaran with the aim of frightening the population," Yunus said.

Nardaran, which is home to 7,000 inhabitants, has been a centre of protest against the government in Baku since last May, when protests were first held there over socio-economic issues. The rallies then became more political in character and escalated dramatically, when a group of village elders who had gone to negotiate with the authorities was arrested.

On June 3, security forces moved into the village and clashed with protestors. One demonstrator, Alihasan Agayev, was killed and many villagers and several policemen were wounded. (See CRS 132 and 133)

As a result of the June clashes, 11 men from Nardaran are currently standing trial in Baku, accused of being Islamic extremists. Most of those on trial have claimed they were tortured in detention. "They hung me upside down, jammed my fingers and toes in a doorpost, so as to torture the confessions the investigators needed out of me," one, Mirzaaga Movlanov, told the court.

The latest violence seems set to polarise positions further, just as Azerbaijan enters a presidential election year.

Opposition politician Araz Alizade, who heads Azerbaijan's Social-Democratic Party, accused President Aliiev's regime of trying to make an example of Nardaran in order to cow the country into obedience.

"The Aliiev regime is founded on fear," Alizade told IWPR. "Slowly the people have been shedding this fear and Aliiev needed to carry out a punishment operation for show to instil fear into the population once again. That is why he chose the most determined village, Nardaran, because if he could break the resistance of the Nardaranis, the rest of the population of Azerbaijan would understand that resistance is useless."

According to political scientist Rauf Mirkadyrov, the government wanted to put on a show of strength, but actually achieved the opposite of what it had intended.

"Thirty kilometres from Baku a territory now exists which is effectively outside the control of the authorities and lives by its own laws," Mirkadyrov said.

"From time to time, the government carries out raids there, which try to intimidate the local population. Basically they are waging a long war of attrition and giving them small jabs as well. This tactic is not working - on the contrary, people are sticking it out and getting tougher."

Azerbaijan is now waiting to see if a monitoring group from the Council of Europe, which arrives in the country on February 10, will condemn the latest violence. Last June, Andreas Gross, the council's rapporteur on Azerbaijan, strongly criticised the government's use of firearms against demonstrators in Nardaran.

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