

Azerbaijani Army in Poor Physical Shape

Author: [Mamed Suleimanov](#)

In a bid to meet impossible recruitment quotas, the Azerbaijani military authorities are drafting recruits who are physically unfit for service

As the spring call-up to the Azerbaijani army looms large, parents are scraping together their savings to try and buy their sons out of military service. Currently, a \$1,500-2,000 bribe will secure an "unfit for military service" assessment for a perfectly healthy young man.

Yet, while woeful conditions in the army ensure that everyone who can dodges the draft, recruitment quotas are apparently being met. In fact, in the best traditions of socialism, the military commissars are reporting that targets are actually being surpassed.

The numbers, it seems, are being made up by those who genuinely are unfit for service.

The conscription of the sick and weak has started to seriously erode morale. The ranks are plagued by an assortment of ailments and complaints, ranging from colour-blindness to serious heart conditions and mental health problems.

Azerbaijani human rights organisations are deluged with complaints from parents whose sickly sons have been called up and, in some cases, subsequently demobbed due to poor health. Recently, on the independent TV channel ANS, the Azerbaijani Defence Minister, Safar Abiev, was forced to admit that the problem existed. He also acknowledged evidence of widespread tuberculosis and dystrophy in army barracks.

The anodyne comment "discharged prematurely as a result of illness" belies the ordeal suffered by Ali Dzhindorov, from the provincial town of Zakatal in north-west Azerbaijan.

In October 1998, he was examined by the regional call-up commission and deemed unfit for service, with a diagnosis of "the initial stages of meningitis". However, four months later, in a bid to meet the call-up targets, the same doctors gave Dzhindorov a clean bill of health.

By last August, Dzhindorov's condition had seriously deteriorated and he was granted a discharge. He has yet to make a full recovery.

Many conscripts suffer from congenital conditions. Despite a history of epilepsy, Vyacheslav Lisachenko was deemed fit for army service and posted to a base on the southern borders.

During his service, he suffered repeated epileptic fits and developed a kidney infection. When his mother died, Lisachenko suffered a nervous breakdown and deserted his unit. He was promptly arrested and imprisoned. In jail, his condition grew steadily worse until the High Court overturned the sentence and ordered his release. The court order has yet to be carried out.

Zamin Gadzhiev, a young journalist from the opposition newspaper *Azadlyg*, fell victim to military vindictiveness. Despite his poor eyesight, Gadzhiev was called up for army service in December 1998.

The journalist had previously written a number of articles about poor conditions in the military -- including an investigation into the case of three young soldiers who died from dystrophy and an article entitled "Hungry Soldiers and Fat Generals".

A medical commission deemed Gadzhiev fit only for service in the rear but he was promptly sent to a frontline zone - ironically a region that had been the subject of one of his articles.

When the journalist's eye problems worsened, he was sent to hospital for treatment and restricted to light duties. However, after complaining to the UN Commission on Human Rights, he was once again posted to a frontline region, this time to a "punishment battalion" where, for a period of four months, he was given starvation rations.

Illness is not only restricted to new conscripts, as army barracks have become a breeding ground for epidemics. Diphtheria and typhoid are rampant while tuberculosis is widespread amongst officers as well as other ranks.

Poor diagnoses have become an occupational hazard. One private, Elnur Zeinalov, died after army doctors failed to diagnose his illness.

One solution to this problem could be a gradual move towards a professional army and the introduction of alternative forms of service.

However, Azerbaijan's ruling cabal insists that, while the country is still effectively at war with Armenia, all talk of alternatives to military service is unpatriotic. Yet, strangely enough, they seem in no hurry to send their own sons to the army.

Mamed Suleimanov is a journalist with the 7 Gyun ("Seven Days") newspaper

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