

Azerbaijan's Conscript Bazaar

Author: [Mamed Suleimanov](#)

The latest conscription round has begun in Azerbaijan -- in the most mercenary fashion imaginable.

For the fourth time this year, Azerbaijan is going through conscription fever: a bout of intense activity, traditionally accompanied by tears, quarrels and blatant corruption.

Young men aged between 18 and 35 are gathering at the national conscription centre in the Bilajary region on the outskirts of Baku. From here they will be sent out to military units across the country.

Outside the centre, the relatives of the future soldiers stand, nervously waiting for news of where their son, brother or nephew will be sent for 18 months' service.

Barbecue salesman grill their meat and teahouse owners open their doors, while junior officers mill around, offering to act as go-betweens.

This reporter, who was accompanying a relative, was offered 100 US dollars here to "buy" a place for him in one of the army units, where the situation is somewhat better- where in other words, there are fewer diseases and the soldiers are better fed. Units, which are further away from the Nagorny Karabakh front line and potential conflict, are also highly sought after.

Azerbaijanis are practiced at dividing the country's military units into three categories - good, average and dangerous - depending on their physical condition, the honesty of local commanders and their proximity to the front line with the Armenians. Unfortunately, judging from the conversations of conscripts, their relatives and human rights activists, the vast majority of places of service are of the third sort.

For example, it is much easier and more prestigious to serve in Baku; while the most unhappy posting is in the Murov mountains, to the north of Karabakh and on the front line. Soldiers die here every year under avalanches or from the cold. Summer heat is another regular killer of young conscripts (see CRS 140, August 1 2002).

This state of affairs has spawned an intricate system of corruption. The smallest sums are paid to gain access into the inner courtyard of the conscription centre, where future soldiers undergo medical examination and are sent out to their units. To get past the soldier guarding the entrance cost me two US dollars.

Inside, the price of the barbecued shashlyk and tea was two or three times higher than outside. There was even a game of street roulette - a remarkable sight in Azerbaijan, where gambling is completely banned.

But the largest sums that change hands are the bribes, securing a postponement of military service or complete exemption from it.

A young man named Nail had come here from Zakatala in northern Azerbaijan. "I was first called to the army a year ago, but I paid the local military commissar 200 dollars and got a deferral for a year," he said. "This year we couldn't get hold of that sum."

Magomed from Belokan had been very unlucky. "A month ago I gave the commissariat 150 dollars so I could be struck off the list for a year," he said. "Then the commissar was unexpectedly sacked, he left and no one gave me my money back. And now I'm being called up."

All the conscripts and their relatives know well that they have to pay 800 to 1000 dollars for full exemption from military service.

Another young man, Samir from Lenkoran, had not yet had his medical, but he already knew where he was serving. "We brought our regional commissar 150 dollars in an envelope and he promised that I will stay in Baku," he said.

Many conversations both at the conscription centre at Bilajary and elsewhere gave me the impression that almost all those conscripts who make here either genuinely want to serve in the Azerbaijani army (and there are fewer and fewer of these) or are not in a position to buy themselves out.

Even those who are not going to give bribes have to shell out. Before local military commissariats paid for conscripts to travel to the centre, but now the young men have to cover their own costs. The average travel expenses are 15 dollars - while average earnings in Azerbaijan are just 20 dollars a month.

Some men arrive at Bilajary to find that they are only being interviewed the next day and have to find accommodation. Next to the centre are basic rooms, which cost five dollars a night to rent. One of the room-owners admitted to IWPR that he has to give up half that sum to the military at the centre.

If you take into account that the conscription process in Azerbaijan happens four times a year and lasts 20 days each time, it is not hard to calculate that the officers of Bilajary are earning vast sums of money.

It is hard to believe that this extensive racket takes place without the knowledge of the defence ministry, but the ministry fully disassociated itself from these allegations.

"What are you saying simply cannot be the case," the head of the defence ministry press office Ramiz Melikov told IWPR. "If you have any facts, send them to me in written form and if just one of them is confirmed, we will take the most severe measures."

"These crimes during conscription and military service are simply genocide against the young," protested Taisia Gordeeva, deputy head of the Soldiers Mothers organisation.

Gordeeva said she had a lot of facts proving that men who were entirely unfit for military service were being called up. For example, a young man called Roman Aliev was severely underweight, but was conscripted nonetheless. He soon ended up in hospital, dangerously ill. "How can our army need soldiers, who constantly need medical attention and whose lives are in danger?" she exclaimed.

"They talk about patriotism, but only poor people who cannot buy themselves out are serving in the army," commented opposition politician and analyst Zardusht Alizade.

Mamed Suleimanov is a journalist with Novoye Vremya newspaper in Baku.

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