

Azeri-Armenian Conflict Fears as Death Toll Rises

Author: [Armen Karapetyan](#)
[Afgan Mukhtarli](#)

Rising numbers of casualties shake 20-year-old ceasefire agreement.

Rising fatalities on the front line around Nagorny Karabakh have raised fears that sporadic shootings may be tipping over into the most serious escalation of tensions since full-scale hostilities ended two decades ago.

The shootings occurred along the “Line of Contact” which marks the boundary between Azerbaijani forces and Armenian-held areas in and around Karabakh. (See [Upsurge in Shootings on Azeri-Armenian Frontier](#) on earlier incidents both around Karabakh and on the Armenian-Azerbaijani state border.)

The Azerbaijani defence ministry said this week that 15 of its soldiers had been killed recently on the Line of Contact, while the Karabakh Armenian military said it had lost five men. These are large figures that would be more typical of a year than just a couple of weeks.

Armenian defence minister Seyran Ohanyan has issued several statements blaming Azerbaijan for the escalation, suggesting it was trying to force the ongoing peace negotiations to go the way it wanted. A series of tweets on Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliiev’s official account this week said that the country’s military now had the capacity to defeat Armenian forces, and that Karabakh would be restored to Azerbaijan.

“We will restore our territorial integrity either by peaceful or military means. We are ready for both options,” said one Tweet.

“Just as we have beaten the Armenians on the political and economic fronts, we are able to defeat them on the battlefield,” said another. “The weaponry and ammunition we have acquired in recent years suggest that we can accomplish any task.

The situation is abnormal enough for United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to issue a call to both sides to refrain from violence.

The OSCE’s Minsk Group, the tripartite mediating body on Karabakh, is also pressing for a de-escalation. On August 4, Ambassador James Warlick, the group’s United States co-chair (the others are from France and Russia) urged Baku and Yerevan to end the violence and called on both presidents to try to resolve the conflict. They were supposed to meet in the Russian city of Sochi later this week.

Foreign ministers from the Minsk Group states had earlier met their Azerbaijani and Armenian counterparts in Brussels, without achieving any apparent progress.

“The co-chairs expressed their serious concern about the increase in tensions and violence, including the targeted killings of civilians, along the Line of Contact and the Armenian-Azerbaijani border,” a joint statement issued after the July 22 meeting read. “They urged the parties to commit themselves to avoiding casualties and rejected the deliberate targeting of villages and the civilian population.”

As well as clashes between armed forces, cross-border incidents have also fuelled tensions.

Karabakh forces said they seized two armed Azerbaijani saboteurs and killed a third after they crossed onto Armenian-held territory on July 11. Shahbaz Guliyev and Dilgam Askarov were captured, while Hasan Hasanov was killed.

Azerbaijan denied the three were engaged in subversive activity, insisting they were just civilians who had crossed the lines to visit the homes they lost when Armenian troops seized control of the area in 1993 – a trip they had made many times before.

Karabakh officials claimed that before being intercepted, the men murdered local shepherd Smbat Tsakanyan and army major Sargis Abrahamyan, as well as injuring a 37-year-old woman, Karine Davtyan, so badly that she lost an eye.

Kurdoglu Askarov, Dilgam’s son, said it was absurd to imagine a 54-year-old man could be a military saboteur.

“My father was unable to accept the occupation of Kelbajar. He kept saying that we should go back to our homes. We’re from the village of Shaplar, and my father used to go there to see his village and visit his

mother's grave," he told IWPR. "What the Armenians say about him being a saboteur and killing a shepherd is all lies. He's been going to Kelbajar for ten years."

Although Karabakh officials showed journalists videos and photographs the men had taken as proof that they were spies, Kurdoglu Askarov said this was nonsense.

"Whenever they returned, they would post the photos and videos they'd taken on the internet. They've never killed anyone, so why would they suddenly start doing so?" he asked.

Askarov said that although he had been born in Kelbajar, he had no memory of it. Kelbajar lies outside Nagorny Karabakh, between it and Armenia, so its capture early on in the war was a strategic win for Armenian forces, but a catastrophe for the 50,000 civilians who had to flee.

"I am 23 and I've lived as a refugee for 21 years. Who's committed the crime?" Askarov asked. "My father, who wanted to visit his home and see his relatives' graves, or those who occupied Kelbajar?"

Arkadi Ter-Tadevosyan, a former Armenian deputy defence minister, dismissed claims that the men just wanted to see their old homes as absurd.

"Crossing the border is extremely dangerous and only those who have received specific training and have particular objectives would take such a risk," he told IWPR.

Officials in Karabakh said the two captives would not be awarded prisoner-of-war status, since they had not been in uniform and had attacked civilians. Prosecutors said Guliyev and Askarov would be charged with murder and sabotage.

The defence ministry in Baku insisted the men had committed no crime.

"No one can stop Azerbaijanis moving freely around these territories. These people did not violate an international border, as the Armenians claim. This land is recognised as part of Azerbaijan by the United Nations," a ministry spokesman said.

Avaz Hasanov, director of the Society for Humanitarian Studies in Baku, said he could understand why Azerbaijanis and Armenians alike would want to see the homes they had lost and visit the graves of their relatives.

"Sadly, no serious work is being done to return relations to normal. That's why, when people are found visiting their homes, they are taken prisoner," he told IWPR. "The Armenians say the captured Azerbaijanis will be tried in court, and it's not yet clear where the case will be heard – in Armenia or in Nagorny Karabakh. Either way, I doubt it will be a fair trial."

Analysts in Yerevan say Azerbaijan believes that Armenia has been left weakened by its rejection of an Association Agreement with the European Union last year. The Armenian government is also concerned at Baku's growing ties with Moscow, traditionally an Armenian ally. (See [Yerevan Angry at Russian Arms Sales to Baku](#).)

Nonetheless, Ter-Tadevosyan said he doubted that active hostilities would resume. In his view, Azerbaijan "doesn't believe it can win, and it knows Armenia could strike at its oil pipelines."

In any case, he said, "Since there are great powers in the region, the question of war wouldn't be decided by Armenia or Azerbaijan anyway. I don't think the world wants war."

Armen Karapetyan is a freelance journalist in Armenia, Afgan Mukhtarli is a reporter for www.civil-forum.az in Azerbaijan.

Location: [Armenia](#)
[Azerbaijan](#)
[Karabakh](#)

Topic: [Conflict](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/azeri-armenian-conflict-fears-death-toll-rises>