

Baku Rebuffs Azeri Refugees

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Azeris fleeing persecution in Iran find their ethnic homeland is short on sympathy.

Refugees fleeing Iranian persecution are being turned away by neighbouring Azerbaijan - even though the asylum-seekers are themselves ethnic Azeris.

The issue promises to be high on the agenda during the official visit of Azerbaijan President Heydar Aliiev's to Tehran in mid-February. But human rights campaigners are sceptical that the Azeri government has the refugees' best interests at heart.

There are currently around 30 million ethnic Azeris living in Iran, nearly half of the country's population, mainly in two north-western regions known as Eastern and Western Azerbaijan.

Relations between the Azeri population and the Iranian regime have traditionally been stormy.

The Azeri intelligentsia oppose Iran's attempts to found an Islamic empire while radical Azeri separatists are pushing to create an independent state. The Iranian authorities have clamped down hard on the Azeri militants, forcing many to flee across the border into Azerbaijan.

In their ethnic homeland, however, the refugees can expect a frosty reception. To date, only 1,000 Iranian Azeris have been granted political asylum - the coveted "dark-blue passport" which entitles them to refugee status, as recognised by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Red Cross.

"Procedures governing refugees from Iran are being conducted by the UNHCR in compliance with an agreement with the Azerbaijani government," said Eldar Zeynalov, director of the Human Rights Centre in Azerbaijan.

Zeynalov went on to explain that the UNHCR was under no obligation to grant all applications for refugee status - or to state the reason for denial.

As a result, the UN headquarters in Baku has been the scene of angry protests by asylum-seekers, including one man who has been on a hunger strike since December 29. Zeynalov accused the Azerbaijani government of deliberately turning the refugees away for fear of souring diplomatic relations with Iran.

To illustrate Azerbaijan's indifference to the plight of the refugees, campaigners cite the case of Iranian dissident Dr Mahmudali Chehragani, a professor at Tabriz University. In late December last year, Chehragani made a personal appeal to the president of Azerbaijan requesting urgent medical treatment in Baku.

He claimed that he had been arrested and tortured by members of the Iranian secret service, despite persistent health problems. The professor also reported random arrests among the Azeri population in Iran and repeated human rights violations.

Chehragani's letter whipped up a storm of protest from members of Azerbaijan's opposition parties while the republic's ex-president, Abulfaz Elchibey, called for diplomats at the Iranian Embassy in Baku to be taken into custody until the professor was granted asylum. However, the appeal fell on deaf ears at Aliev's presidential palace.

Opposition parties also accuse the government of using the refugees as political hostages. They point to the much-publicised defection last summer of Piruz Dilenchi, chairman of the Baku Committee of the National Liberation Movement for South Azerbaijan.

Dilenchi, a leading figure in the underground organisation which boasts 21 separate cells, stands accused of high treason and risks the death sentence if he returns to Iran.

Dilenchi, who was granted Azerbaijani citizenship following his escape from Iran, says that he was a pawn in a larger political game. The move, he claims, came in direct retaliation for an earlier ruling by Iranian authorities to offer asylum to Mahir Javadov, who took part in the Baku coup of March 1995.

Javadov was the brother of Special Police Unit (OPON) commander Rovshan Javadov, who was killed during the ensuing unrest. Mahir Javadov escaped to Austria, before moving to Iran where he continues to plot against the Aliev regime.

Little hope remains of extraditing political prisoners. Iran and Azerbaijan agreed to the extradition of convicted felons in November of last year but Azerbaijan has signed the Geneva Convention, which forbids the surrender of political refugees.

However, opposition parties point to recent precedents - former Prime Minister Suret Husseynov and former Defence Minister Rahim Gaziyeu were both extradited from Russia to Azerbaijan, where they are now serving life imprisonment for their part in the failed coup d'etat of October 1994.

The refugees themselves are confident that extradition will continue to remain an empty threat. "It contradicts any logic," said Piruz Dilenchi, "as the struggle against the Iranian regime is our common cause."

Many observers are concerned that President Aliev's forthcoming visit to Tehran will do little to improve the situation for Iranian refugees. The Azerbaijani regime, they say, is more interested in political point scoring than in protecting the interests of non-voting Azeris.

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