

Civilian Deaths Underline Armenia-Azerbaijan Tensions

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Latest incident attributed to lack of emergency channels through which opposing militaries could communicate.

The latest landmine fatality on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border highlights the need for some kind of communication system between the two sides to prevent more civilian deaths.

Eduard Dallakyan, a 26-year-old farmer from the village of Aygedzor in Armenia's northeastern Tavush region, died on September 24 after stepping on a mine on the border with Azerbaijan.

He suffered serious leg and arm injuries in the blast, and rescuers were unable to reach him in time to save his life because Azerbaijani soldiers were firing shots at him.

Dallakyan ventured into no-man's land to chase back some pigs that had wandered out of Armenian-controlled pasture land.

Sasun Safaryan, the head of the village, described what happened next.

"After the explosion, the Azerbaijanis kept the area under fire for more than 40 minutes. The injured man managed to drag himself 30 metres from the site of the blast and hide so that the bullets didn't hit him," he said. "Rescuers did finally get to him, but he died before reaching hospital."

Like other frontier villages, Aygedzor with its 2,500 people is constantly at risk from sporadic outbreaks of gunfire across the line. Villagers find it hard to go about their normal business, and those like Dallakyan who need to go out and work on the land are in danger of getting hurt or killed. (See **Gunfire as Extension of Politics on Azeri-Armenian Border**.)

"Because of the hardship facing his family, Dallakyan went the whole way [to save] his livestock. He just didn't have anything else to live off," Safaryan said. "He's been married less than a year, and his wife is expecting their first child."

When incidents occur, there are no channels of communication between the Armenian and Azerbaijani troops stationed along the frontier. The same is true of the "line of control" separating Azerbaijani units from the armed forces of Armenian-run Nagorny Karabakh

"Sadly there is no such thing [communications channel], as the Azerbaijanis have never taken the required steps," Armenian defence ministry spokesman Artsrun Hovhannisyan said. "We have often suggested it, as have the [OSCE] Minsk Group mediators, but the Azerbaijanis have always rejected the idea."

The Karabakh war ended in 1994 with a truce but no peace agreement. Two decades on, negotiations led by the OSCE's Minsk Group have failed to bring the sides any closer than they are now on the key issue - whether Karabakh should return to being part of Azerbaijan, or become a recognised separate state.

According to Tevan Poghosyan, a member of Armenia's parliament from the opposition Heritage party, the Minsk Group was supposed to have set up a five-member team to investigate allegations of ceasefire violations and record any loss of life that resulted from them.

"In theory, these mechanisms exist, but in reality they don't since the Azerbaijanis won't agree to investigations on their territory," he added. "They should come and investigate incidents, and then show the international community the real reason why the life of this civilian [Dallakyan] couldn't be saved."

Experts in Armenia says further civilian casualties are inevitable.

"The Minsk Group must act clearly to make the Azerbaijanis take responsibility for action to reduce tensions on the front line to a minimum," Sergei Minasyan, deputy head of the Caucasus Institute in Yerevan, told IWPR.

Ambassadors from the Minsk Group's three co-chair states - the United States, Russia and France - met the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan at the United Nations on September 27, but made no progress.

In a statement, the co-chairs said they had "stressed the commitment of their three countries to support the peaceful settlement of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict based on the non-use of force or the threat of force, territorial integrity, and equal rights and self-determination of peoples".

Poghosyan said the Minsk Group was failing to do its job properly.

“The problem is that they try to operate honestly, impartially and without bias, but when they do act, they avoid taking responsibility. After every incident, they limit themselves to spineless statements, with appeals and requests addressed to both sides,” he said.

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