

## **Fire Fight Over Karabakh**

Armenians and Azerbaijanis accuse each other of deliberately starting blazes on disputed land, while others blame the heat of a dry summer.

A series of wildfires raging on lands around Nagorny Karabakh have sparked a new war of words in the unresolved territorial dispute between Azerbaijanis and Armenians.

The Azerbaijani authorities accused the Armenians of deliberately starting fires in areas to the east of Karabakh which, although they are not part of the disputed territory itself, have been under the de facto control of Armenian forces since the ceasefire of 1994.

No one lives in these territories, but the lands are cultivated by Armenian farmers from Karabakh.

Azerbaijan's environment ministry says more than 132 square kilometres of land has been burned, causing damage estimated at around five million US dollars. Azerbaijani environmentalists have named six villages in the Aghdam region east of Karabakh which they say have been razed to the ground.

The Armenian authorities in Karabakh have rejected these charges, saying that the fires have either occurred naturally as a result of drought conditions, or have been started by negligent local people - or caused by gunfire from the Azerbaijani side of the ceasefire line.

Igbal Agazade, a member of the Azerbaijani parliament who visited the ceasefire line that divides the two sides, said the fires were "nothing other than mass arson".

He told IWPR, "This is not a whim of nature, but a continuation of the Armenians' policy of destroying all evidence that Karabakh is indigenous Azerbaijani land. If that wasn't the case, the fires would also be happening on lands controlled by the Azerbaijanis where the climatic conditions are identical.

"The Armenians are doing this deliberately to destroy our graveyards and historical monuments. The historic Nargiz-Tepe monument, which is more than 2,000 years old, has already been wiped off the face of the earth. This is ecological terrorism."

These allegations are denied by the authorities in Nagorny Karabakh, a republic that is unrecognised by the international community.

"At this time of year, fires in the wheatfields are nothing out of the ordinary for Nagorny Karabakh, and they occur for very different reasons," Vahram Baghdasarian, Karabakh's agriculture minister, told IWPR. "But this year, the number and extent of the fires in the wheatfields in zones bordering Azerbaijan has increased somewhat as a consequence of shooting from the Azerbaijani side, using tracer bullets which can start a fire instantly."

David Mikaelian, press spokesman for the government in Stepanakert (which the Azerbaijanis call Khankendi), added, "In this season when the temperature rises to 40 degrees and more, it is natural that there are fires in the fields - it does not mean they were started deliberately. But we do have information

that Azerbaijani soldiers are responsible for arson in these areas.”

Mikaelian said the local fire service had been deployed to extinguish the fires. The emergency services department in Stepanakert said that it had recorded 128 fires this season, and that the fire service had been sent out to deal with all of them. Spokesman Armen Narimanian said more than 1,000 hectares of uncultivated land and 165 hectares of harvested land had been burned.

Masis Mailian, deputy foreign minister of the unrecognised republic, told IWPR that it had been hard for the fire services to put out the blazes because shots fired by the Azerbaijanis created fears for the safety of the firemen.

The Karabakh authorities released a statement on July 3, saying that Ambassador Andrzej Kasprzyk, who has acted as the main international monitor of the ceasefire line for the last nine years, in his capacity as representative of the chairman of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, had just conducted a monitoring mission in the Aghdam area and had seen no evidence that population centres had been burned - as alleged by the Azerbaijanis - but had seen traces of a fire that began on the Azerbaijani side of the ceasefire line.

In complete contradiction to this, an Azerbaijani defence ministry spokesman said the OSCE ambassador had “literally with his own eyes” witnessed proof of deliberate arson by the Armenians.

Ambassador Kasprzyk could not be contacted by IWPR for clarification.

Matthew Bryza, United States deputy assistant Secretary of State and chief negotiator on the Karabakh conflict, told the day.az news agency in Azerbaijan that he was “worried” by the reports and had seen satellite photographs on which “the boundaries of the fires... are so distinct that it looks as though someone had thought in advance how to start them and how far the fires should spread”.

Bryza said he was reserving judgement until Ambassador Kasprzyk made his report.

On June 27, the Azerbaijani delegation at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg issued a statement accusing the Armenians of “mass arson on the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, as a result of which thousands of hectares of territory were destroyed, doing great damage to the environment. The flames also spread onto territory under the control of Azerbaijan. Fauna, buildings and cultural monuments on these territories were completely destroyed”.

In response, Heghine Naghdalian, a delegate from Armenia, said, “The Azerbaijanis don’t understand that fires do not recognise administrative boundaries.

“The Azerbaijanis speak about deliberate fires in the territories adjoining Nagorny Karabakh without understanding that the Karabakhis cannot set fire to those fields and woods which they use for their own needs.”

Naghdalian claimed the matter was being raised to distract attention from an issue that Armenia has raised at the Council of Europe - the alleged destruction of the medieval Armenian cemetery of Djughha in Nakhichevan, Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijani parliamentary deputy Malahat Hasanova gave another version of events to IWPR, saying that the Armenians were carrying out a “scorched earth policy” as they understood that they would soon be abandoning these territories and wanted to leave behind dead and burned lands.

However, not everyone is inclined to see a political subtext to the fires. Many farmers questioned by IWPR said fires were a perennial problem in the region.

“One carelessly-dropped cigarette, and a fire starts immediately,” said Larisa Danielian who lives in the village of Shahbulakh in Karabakh.

Leonid Soghomonian, who lives in the village of Berdashen in the Martuni district, reported “the burning of a large amount of weeds standing more than two metres high weeds on the border, which block visibility between Karabakhi and Azerbaijani soldiers”.

Soghomonian said that the weeds were burned by soldiers on both sides to give them a better view of their adversaries, and that many such fires had been started over the past few years.

“But when a fire like this starts up, it’s impossible to stop it – the grass is very dry, and it spreads very quickly. And as our crops are directly next to the border, many of the owners of cultivated land have suffered badly from the fires and lost 10 or 15 hectares of their harvest.”

Rufat Abbasov is a journalist and IWPR contributor in Baku. Karine Ohanian is a freelance journalist working in Nagorny Karabakh. Karine Asatrian is a correspondent for A1+ television.

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