

Karabakh Peace Deal in Jeopardy

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The suspension of the latest round of peace talks on the long-running feud for control of Nagorno-Karabakh does not augur well for the region.

The long-festering territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan looks in danger of spilling over once more following threatening noises of a possible Chechnya-type assault on the Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Fears were spurred by a warning from Azerbaijan's national security minister Nammik Abbasov that his country "possesses all necessary means to carry out an anti-terror operation on the territories occupied by Armenia". The term "anti-terror operation" was used by Russia about its assault on Chechnya.

The Armenian security minister, Karlos Petrosian, replied tersely in an interview with the Yerevan newspaper *Ajotz Ashkhar*, "If Azerbaijan's special services assume that they can carry out an 'anti-terror' operation on these territories, I can assure you that their actions will receive an appropriate response."

The row over Nagorno-Karabakh, a large pocket of ethnic Armenians inside Azerbaijan, stretches back to the days of Stalin. The two countries went to war over it in 1992 and the conflict ended two years later with Armenians in control of the enclave along with an access path across Azeri territory.

Since then the matter has been continuously thrashed out within the OSCE in international negotiations chaired by The United States, Russia and France. There were hopeful signs following the end of peace talks in Key West, Florida, earlier this year. Mediators described the negotiations there as a 'breakthrough' for the Karabakh problem. They expressed hope that a peace agreement would be signed by the end of this year.

The question was held over for a meeting in Geneva in the second half of June when the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group were expected to seal the Key West agreements.

However, the Geneva meeting was put off indefinitely following a visit to the region last month by the Minsk Group. Clearly surprised, the mediators said vaguely that more time was needed.

As the time for Geneva approached, the co-chairs began saying that public opinion in Armenia and Azerbaijan was not prepared for a compromise. The diplomats said this was due to leaks, not always accurate, about the agreement.

The co-chairs said a judgment on the compromise should be made only after studying the whole package of so far undisclosed mutual concessions. French co-chair Philippe de Suremain refused to comment on a rumour that the agreement provided a communication corridor through Armenian territory connecting Azerbaijan with fellow Azeris in the Nakhichevan region.

On June 13, Armenian foreign minister Vardan Oskanian commented, "It is not our fault that negotiations were postponed. Armenia is ready to continue talks on the basis of agreements already reached. "However he declined to blame Baku directly for the delay.

On May 5, when the Geneva talks were still confidently anticipated, the US co-chair Carey Cavanaugh made a surprise visit to Azerbaijan, giving rise to speculation that Azerbaijan's President Heydar Aliev had changed his mind about the deal.

A week after Cavanaugh's visit, all three co-chairs travelled to New York to meet the Armenian president Robert Kocharian, presumably to warn him that the agreement was running into snags.

A clear sign that the 'breakthrough' was not as promising as had appeared came with a statement by President Aliev that "the mediators prepared a shameful peace for Baku".

Cavanaugh would not confirm that the deal had been wrecked by Azerbaijan. But it was widely accepted that Baku had created a difficult situation for the Minsk Group.

It is also evident that the Armenian side is unwilling to revise the agreements reached in Key West and start again from scratch. There have been reports that Presidents Kocharian and Aliev will meet in two or three months.

President Kocharian has already said that Armenia is insisting on "de facto and de jure independence for Nagorno Karabakh". It is hard to see how President Aliev could swallow this.

The co-chairs are planning to visit the region in the first half of July. In the meantime, they appealed to the parties to refrain from "any steps that could complicate the situation".

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