

Karabakh Talks Do Not Deliver

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The presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan are trying hard to keep the Nagorny Karabakh peace process alive.

The longest ever face-to-face talks between the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents failed to deliver a breakthrough on the frozen dispute over Nagorny Karabakh.

Instead, after four hours of talks on August 14 at Sadarak, in a dusty plain on the border between Armenia and the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan, the presidents laid great emphasis on the fact that the peace process was still alive and that they were ruling out a return to fighting.

Time has virtually run out for both leaders to come up with a peace settlement for the fourteen-year-old dispute before presidential elections take place in both countries next year, making it virtually impossible for either side to make new compromise offers in the short term.

"If we don't resolve this problem, then who will?" said Kocharian after the Sadarak meeting, hinting at the urgency of their endeavour. "Taking into account my biography and that of Heidar Aliev and our connections with the Nagorny Karabakh problem, we feel that a great responsibility lies on us in this regard."

"I tell you that the peace process is essential to Azerbaijan," Aliev said. "On this issue, Kocharian and I were unanimous."

The encounter was the 21st face-to-face meeting between the two presidents, since they first got together in 1999. It also followed the longest gap - nine months - in their bilateral negotiating marathon over Karabakh.

A special tented camp was set up on the Nakhichevan-Armenia border, with separate tents for the two presidents, their security guards and journalists. Food and water was brought in specially and proved absolutely essential in the August heat. American, French and Russian negotiators from the OSCE were not present, but were kept informed about the meeting.

The peace process has been effectively stalled since last year. At meetings in Paris and Key West, Florida, the two sides made great progress towards a framework agreement. This is still the basis of all negotiations, but the parties have failed to close the gap between their positions.

One official close to the negotiations said that the new round of talks was aimed at "consolidating the situation" - keeping the discussions going and stopping the process from unravelling. Both leaders have staked their domestic and international reputations on a successful outcome of the peace process. "It was a political gesture to show the process is alive and is not yet completely dead," said the official.

As the new polls get nearer, opposition politicians in both countries have stepped up criticism of the two presidents for their handling of the Karabakh situation.

In Armenia, most of the indignation has focussed on allegations that Kocharian is willing to allow a corridor

of land across Armenia between Nakhichevan and the rest of Azerbaijan - a compromise Armenian ministers again denied this week that they are willing to make.

"By agreeing to a meeting in Sadarak, Kocharian demonstrated once again that the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorny Karabakh is all about territory," wrote the Yerevan opposition newspaper Aikakan Zhamanak. "We cannot go down this road, but Kocharian is solving his personal problems. It is well known that now as before, he is striving to demonstrate to Russia and the USA, who are dissatisfied with him, that there is progress in settling the conflict. But he is harming Nagorny Karabakh with his policies."

In Azerbaijan, there are increasingly loud opposition calls to abandon talks and launch a military campaign to retake lands held by the Armenians.

"I don't see any concrete results coming from this meeting," said Azerbaijan's former presidential adviser Vafa Guluzade. "The only thing which I notice is that the presidents declared that they will not resort to military methods of resolving the conflict. And that of course is to Armenia's benefit and that's probably why Kocharian looked so pleased after the meeting and even emphasised that he was in a good mind."

Writing in the opposition paper Yeni Musavat, political scientist Rasim Musabekov wrote, "Kocharian wants a guaranteed promise that Azerbaijan won't break the ceasefire before the coming presidential elections in Armenia in February next year." Musabekov went on to call for a limited military offensive on the eve of the Armenian elections.

Even the Azerbaijani foreign minister, Vilayat Guliev, warned that Baku might abandon the peace process eventually, if nothing was achieved. "Negotiations cannot continue for ever," he told journalists in Sadarak. "The Azerbaijani people will never be reconciled to the loss of its territories. Sooner or later, we will liberate them. How that happens, only time till tell."

In response to this, the Armenian defence minister, Serzh Sarkisian, pointedly said that a new round of the Karabakh conflict would be much bloodier than the war of 1991-4. Sarkisian said that both countries now had "serious reserves and trained armies and this time war will be on quite a different scale". He predicted that in a new conflict losses would be 15-20 times higher than in the previous one.

Sarkisian met his Azerbaijani counterpart Safar Abiev at Sadarak to discuss ways of strengthening the ceasefire that has been in place since fighting ended in May 1994.

Aliev and Kocharian are due to meet again at the summit of CIS countries in Kishinev in October.

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