

Tbilisi and Baku Quarrel Over Cargos

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Georgian businessmen hit by a row over whether freight cars from Azerbaijan are destined for Armenia

The Azerbaijani authorities have detained more than 900 freight railcars travelling to Georgia in the past month, following suspicions that they were actually en route to Baku's long-standing enemy, Armenia.

The row has not only cost Georgian businesses millions of US dollars but has also damaged the traditionally good relations between Baku and Tbilisi, which were recently cemented further by the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.

Most of the freight containers, containing diesel oil, flour, liquefied gas, grain and other items, had travelled by sea from Central Asia to Baku, where they continued by rail. Many were heading for Georgia's Black Sea ports of Batumi and Poti and onwards to European markets.

While some of the freight cars were allowed to cross the frontier last week, a significant number are still stuck at the Beyuk-Kasik border crossing. Last month, only cargoes originating in Azerbaijan were allowed to cross, without any explanation from Baku why the others should be stopped.

However, Azerbaijani ambassador Ramiz Hasanov was invited to the Georgian foreign ministry to discuss the issue, he told the media that Baku suspected that freight was passing through Georgia to Armenia, in contravention of an agreement his government signed with Tbilisi in June forbidding the transit of goods to a third country "contrary to their national interests".

"Azerbaijan has its own national interests in connection with this issue," Hasanov said, referring to its bitter dispute with Armenia over Nagorny Karabakh. "How would [Georgia] react if Azerbaijan delivered fuel or other cargo to [the disputed territories] Abkhazia and South Ossetia? That would damage the national interests of Georgia."

Azerbaijani prime minister Artur Rasizade told IWPR that he had evidence that several freight carriages transporting oil products were indeed intended for Armenia.

Georgian prime minister Zurab Zhvania has tried to play down the incident, telling journalists that he saw no reason to "dramatise" the situation. "We are working with the Azerbaijani side and I am sure that we won't have any problems," he said.

In an attempt to resolve the situation, Georgian Railways' commercial director Ramiz Giorgadze travelled to Baku, while officials from the Azerbaijani customs committee visited Tbilisi and checked the freight cars' documentation. Those that were given the all clear by customs officials were immediately allowed to cross into Georgia.

Georgian officials said that none of the detained freight cars were travelling to Armenia, although David Onoprishvili, chairman of Georgian Railways, conceded that this had happened before.

The Georgian customs department told IWPR that the issue had only become relevant after the inter-governmental agreement signed by the two nations came into force on November 22.

Customs officials have said that Georgia would no longer re-export cargos to Armenia, in line with Azerbaijani requests.

However, Georgia's deputy minister of economic development Geno Muradian argued that there was no legal basis for stopping most of the cars, even if they did proceed to Armenia.

"Wheat and oil are not military cargos, and cannot threaten the security of a country. If they end up in Armenia, it won't be a tragedy," he said.

"For a long time transit, cargos from Azerbaijan have not officially been going to Armenia," Muradian went on. "But business has its own laws, and a businessman who receives goods in Georgia will find ways to send them on to Armenia if he wants to."

Officials in both countries are now debating what harm the row has done to relations.

Georgian economic expert Giorgi Khukhasvili said, "Azerbaijan is our strategic partner, our countries are fully integrated with regard to transit shipments, and without Azerbaijan, Georgia's transit functions are worth nothing."

However, Baku political analyst Rasmi Agayev argued in an article in the Obozrevatel newspaper that the two nations' strategic partnership "is no more than a declaration", and criticised Tbilisi for its "double standards" in not supporting Azerbaijan over the Karabakh dispute.

Georgian businesses are being tight-lipped about what the dispute has cost them, although losses are believed to run into millions of dollars.

Vano Mtvralashvili, head of the Union of Producers, Importers and Consumers of Oil Products, said many Georgian importers whose products had been delayed on the border for a month had asked him for help.

For example, said Mtvralashvili, one firm was trying to import 1,200 tonnes of diesel oil from Turkmenistan, where prices were cheaper. Despite having all the documentation to prove that the oil was intended for Georgia's domestic market, it was not being allowed through.

"If the Azerbaijanis had doubts about Georgian companies, then why didn't they stop the cargoes on the Turkmen-Azerbaijani border?" complained Mtvralashvili. "Now they've paid Baku fees for a transit that they can't complete."

In any case, he said, Armenia would not be bereft of petroleum products because it also used other transit routes.

Both governments now say they are confident that full freight traffic will be restored in the next few days. But the deeper implications of this row may have a much more lasting effect.

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