

Transcaucasus explodes on the heels of Baker's visit

by Konstantin George

Despite three abortive cease-fires arranged between Feb. 20 and Feb. 27, the war in the Transcaucasus between Azerbaidzhan and Armenia continues to rage full force, as Azerbaidzhani forces escalated their shelling of Stepanakert, the capital of the Armenian-inhabited enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. The latest cease-fire, a three-day "breathing space" which began Feb. 27, was arranged through the feverish, though by no means neutral efforts of Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, shuttling between Baku and Yerevan, the capitals of Azerbaidzhan and Armenia, respectively.

Three Muslim nations of Southwest Asia have become directly involved, supposedly in mediation efforts, but in fact they are backing Muslim Azerbaidzhan. These are Iran and, acting as partial surrogates for the United States, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. It is noteworthy that the activities by Iran and Saudi Arabia to conclude a cease-fire became frenzied only when Armenian forces began mounting successful counteroperations to save the besieged and hungry inhabitants of Karabakh.

It was the Bush administration, however, which sanctioned the Azeri offensive against Karabakh, in collaboration with the Turkish regime of Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel. The bombardment of Stepanakert began Feb. 14, three days after the visit of U.S. Secretary of State James Baker to Baku for talks with the Azerbaidzhani leadership. While Baker was in Baku, George Bush and Demirel were meeting in Washington. On Feb. 14, the very day that the bombardment began, the U.N. Security Council voted, on American initiative, to unconditionally recommend Azerbaidzhan's admission to the United Nations.

The next qualitative escalation of the war by Azerbaidzhan, beginning with a devastating round of shelling against Stepanakert on Feb. 21, occurred immediately after the Feb.

20 White House announcement that Washington would unconditionally assume full diplomatic relations with Azerbaidzhan. Speaking to reporters while in Baku, Baker proclaimed that the condition for U.S. recognition of Azerbaidzhan would be its "respect for human rights."

What we are seeing now is a replay of Bush administration policy in the Balkans. It was Secretary Baker's June 1991 visit to Belgrade which gave the go-ahead to the Serbian communists to launch their murderous war of conquest against Croatia. The United States, unlike all European states, has still refused to recognize the independence of Croatia and Slovenia.

The support of war and crisis escalation in the Transcaucasus is part of an Anglo-American policy promoting their willing junior partner, Turkey, to become the regional power, serving American interests in the Caucasus, Balkans, Central Asia, and parts of the Arab Middle East. The implementation of this policy was worked out at the Washington summit between Bush and Demirel.

A senior European defense specialist observed to *EIR* on Feb. 24 that Baker and "the whole lot" running policy from Washington and London are "a bunch of idiots, running around like headless chickens. Their depth of historical knowledge can be measured in the millimetric. There's no way to have any idea of what you're doing in that area, unless you are familiar with the intricacies of the last 150 years of history there. There are many precedents for workable arrangements, but there's no way of coming up with any workable policy today unless we look back. . . . We're still living with the awful residue of the breakdown and collapse of the Ottoman Empire, a post-colonial settlement from which we can find no way out. Meanwhile, Baker runs around, making statements and speeches, as if history there

began yesterday. He's making a fool of himself."

By Feb. 26, the conflict had expanded to include other western powers. French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas proposed the establishment of internationally supervised "security corridors" and "buffer zones" in and around the Karabakh enclave. The "Dumas Plan" will probably be presented to the U.N. Security Council, as the first official move in the direction of a U.N. military force being sent to the Transcaucasus.

Drawing in Russia

On Feb. 23, Azerbaidzhan attacked the 366th Motorized Rifle Regiment of the Community of Independent States (CIS) forces based in Stepanakert. The attack, occurring on Russian Armed Forces Day, killed two Russian soldiers. It was either a crude attempt to provoke a Russian military response and force a confrontation between Russia and Turkey, or to force a withdrawal of CIS troops from Karabakh and Azerbaidzhan, opening the path toward greater military involvement by Turkey. On the same day, the jeep carrying Gen. Nikolai Popov, commander of CIS forces in Azerbaidzhan, was attacked in Baku.

These are only a few of the many Azerbaidzhani provocations against Russian forces stationed in Karabakh and Azerbaidzhan. The non-stop rocket bombardment of Stepanakert since Feb. 14 is also designed to provoke the 366th Regiment to fight on the side of the Armenians. Rockets and shells have repeatedly hit the soldiers' garrison compound and the quarters of officers' families. There has also been a regular pattern of Azeri forces attacking or ambushing Russian troop convoys in Azerbaidzhan, besieging battalion-size units, and seizing stores of conventional small arms, artillery shells, and rockets from CIS stocks on Azerbaidzhan territory.

On Feb. 24, Azeri forces raided a CIS arms depot in the Agdam district, east of Karabakh, and made off with, according to the CIS tally, 728 cases of artillery shells, 225 containers of large caliber rockets, and 130 containers of 122 millimeter rockets. Rockets mounted on Multi-Barrel Rocket Launchers, stolen from CIS stocks, have been the main artillery used by Azeri forces in their terror attacks on Armenian civilians in Stepanakert and elsewhere. The massive haul seized on Feb. 24 portends an escalation in the fighting.

The Azeri attacks and provocations forced Marshal Yevgeni Shaposhnikov, commander-in-chief of all CIS forces, to issue an order on Feb. 24 authorizing CIS forces to fire back in self-defense if attacked, and to use whatever force is required to defeat any attacker. The move, however, is strictly defensive. The war is a nightmare for Russia, although nobody wants to talk about it publicly. Nearly 1 million Russian civilians live in Azerbaidzhan, including at least 500,000 in Baku alone, and could become hostages or pogrom victims. Similar large urban concentrations of Russians exist throughout all of the former Soviet Central Asian republics.

The 'massacre' that never was

In the 48 hours preceding the "cease-fire" on Feb. 27, Armenian forces had achieved the first significant victories toward breaking the Azerbaidzhani encirclement of Karabakh. On Feb. 26, Armenian militias, driving southwest within Karabakh, had captured the village of Khodzhal, one of two key Azerbaidzhani strongholds inside Karabakh. Khodzhal had been the base from which Azeri forces had shelled Stepanakert Airport, thus preventing any airlift of food, fuel, arms, and other supplies for the 300,000 Armenians of Karabakh, except for the minuscule amounts that could be brought in by helicopter.

In a parallel thrust, other Armenian forces captured Azeri positions around the town of Shusha, the other main Azerbaidzhani stronghold in Karabakh, located in the southwest part of that region. Through these gains, Shusha has been surrounded, and its Azerbaidzhani garrison cut off. The advances made by Armenian militias on Feb. 25-26 have given the Armenian forces the potential to drive the Azeri attackers out of the southern part of Karabakh, and to move the additional 12-30 kilometers (at its closest, the distance between Armenia and Karabakh is 11-12 kilometers) to link it up with the Armenia.

The response of the Azerbaidzhan leadership has been to prepare for the next escalation, including renewed attempts to induce a foreign intervention on Azerbaidzhan's behalf. When Khodzhal was captured, a spokesman for Azerbaidzhan President Ayaz Mutalibov issued a declaration charging that CIS troops of the 366th Regiment had attacked and captured the village and, together with Armenians, had "massacred" 100 Azerbaidzhani civilians. This was the fourth time in two weeks that Azerbaidzhan had falsely accused the 366th Regiment of fighting alongside the Armenians. The charge of committing a "massacre" opens the path for atrocities against the large Russian community in Azerbaidzhan.

There may have been some civilian deaths in the battle for Khodzhal, but the reports of a "massacre" are untrue. Armenia issued an official denial of the charges, and noted that earlier in February, well before the battle, Azeri civilians had fled, pointing out that the Azerbaidzhan government itself had earlier condemned as an Armenian "crime" the forced flight of Azeri civilians from Khodzhal and nearby villages. The tragedy is that the report of a Khodzhal "massacre" is believed by everyone in Azerbaidzhan, and this will be used as the justification for the next round of Azeri attacks.

One can only hope that European countries will not repeat the combination of blunders, cowardice, and crimes that allowed Croatia to bleed for so long, and intervene with the political and economic means at their disposal on behalf of a just peace for the people of Armenia and Azerbaidzhan. Ironically, the more successful the government of Azerbaidzhan becomes in its aggression against the Armenians, the more it jeopardizes its own sovereignty and becomes a tool in the hands of one or another regional power.