

# Transcaucasus goes into civil war phase

by Luba George

On Oct. 11, Soviet troops fired on a crowd of Armenian protesters in Stepanakert, the capital of Azerbaijan's Armenian-inhabited region of Nagorno-Karabakh. One person was killed and many injured. The action came 48 hours after a Soviet government ultimatum expired which called for an end to Armenian-Azerbaijani armed ethnic clashes, and for an end to the two-month-old Azerbaijan rail and road blockade of Armenia and Karabakh. The blockade had crippled Armenia's and Karabakh's economy, halted industry and transport, and caused extreme food shortages, bordering on starvation in some remote areas.

One day before the Stepanakert bloodbath, Radio Moscow had announced that Azerbaijan had ended the blockade, and that trains and truck convoys under military escort were beginning to roll into Armenia and Karabakh. Such announcements had been made twice before in the preceding two weeks, and each time were proven to be false. On Oct. 12, U.S.S.R. Railways Minister Konarev announced that the Azerbaijanis not only had *not* ended the blockade of Armenia but had extended the rail blockade to include all goods moving through Azerbaijan bound for the republic of Georgia. He said that the Azerbaijanis were angry because some of the supplies shipped to Georgia were being transshipped to Armenia to circumvent Azerbaijan's blockade.

Even should the blockade in the near future be lifted, this will only have occurred through the massive use of troops to keep the rail lines and roads open. The combination of Soviet Interior and Railway Troops—placed under Gorbachov's personal control—is what is being employed to break the rail blockade. Ending the blockade, even assuming it happens, will by no means end the Transcaucasian crisis, which has reached a civil war-like dimension—between two non-Russian, non-Slavic peoples.

The Soviet leadership both foresees and intends to have the region experience a protracted civil war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, to channel extremely strong nationalist movements in both republics into a suicidal collision against each other, instead of directing their energies against the imperial center.

## KGB-instigated

The civil war dynamic was unleashed as the result of the February 1988 pogroms against Armenians in the city of

Sumgait, Azerbaijan. These waves of persecution were sponsored by the Soviet secret police, the KGB. In three days of pogroms, as the KGB and militia failed to intervene, Azeri mobs murdered and raped hundreds of Armenians. The official death toll was given at 32. Since then, Azeri pogroms against Armenians and inter-ethnic clashes have claimed up to 1,000 lives—much higher than the official accounts of 100 deaths, according to *EIR's* sources.

For the Armenians, the massacre by Turkish Azeris evoked the fear of a repeat of the 1915 genocide against the Armenian nation by the Ottoman Empire. The Sumgait massacre was the first peak in a KGB-run Azeri intimidation campaign against the Armenian-inhabited region of Karabakh, a part of Armenia until 1923, when Lenin and Stalin detached it and gave it to Azerbaijan.

The two forms of the approaching slaughter in the Transcaucasus are already evident. The first will be continually growing clashes between armed bands of Armenians and Azerbaijanis. As TASS began to report on Oct. 6, "daily bloody clashes" have been occurring between "armed bands" of these two national groups. These clashes have been centered in Karabakh, the Azeri district of Agdam, bordering on Armenia, the Azeri enclave of Nakhichevan, separated from the rest of Azerbaijan by Armenian territory, and the "finger" of Armenian territory that separates Azerbaijan from Nakhichevan.

According to the Oct. 3 weekly *Moscow News*, Soviet pilots airlifting supplies to Nagorno-Karabakh had spotted "secret encampments" in the hilly terrain on the territory's western borders. It said there was a "firm basis" to believe they were used to train insurgents. "Not a single day and night passes without shots, explosions, mines, arsons, and pogroms" said Valeri Sidorov, a member of the Kremlin committee governing the region, in an interview with the newspaper *Argumenti i Fakty*.

The second form of conflict, which has also already begun, will be massacres of both Armenians and Azerbaijanis, carried out by the tens of thousands of Soviet troops from elite airborne and special units, which have poured into these regions since Sept. 23.

In the days leading up to the Oct. 9 expiration of Gorbachov's ultimatum for an end to the Azerbaijan rail blockade of Armenia, an entire elite division of MVD (Interior Ministry) Troops, composed of "special units," recruited from ex-Army Airborne and Spetsnaz Afghan War veterans (*Afgantsi*), were flown into Azerbaijan's Armenian-inhabited Karabakh region from the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan, where they had been deployed in June to quell the pogrom against Meshketian Turks in the region. The troops come under the command of Gen. Maj. Vladislav Safonov, of the Interior Troops, who since late spring has been the new military commandant of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Sidorov in *Argumenti i Fakty* hinted of things to come: "If we don't bridle these forces we will have a home-made

Lebanon in the Caucasus.” Even before casualties were claimed in Stepanakert Oct. 11, on Oct. 7, as Gorbachov was reviewing the German Democratic Republic’s 40th anniversary military parade in East Berlin, and the G.D.R. security organs were mercilessly beating thousands of protesters, Soviet Interior Ministry elite troops opened fire on “an armed band” of Armenians in Karabakh, who were in the process of attacking an Azerbaijani-inhabited village. TASS reported, “there were wounded.”

### **Armenia’s growing dependency on military**

Armenia depends on rail lines that run through Azerbaijan for 87% of its supplies, and the blockade, which ended shipments of fuel, food, raw materials, and construction materials, had brought all of Armenia’s transport and car traffic, as well as ambulance service, to a halt, shut down most industry, and stopped all post-earthquake reconstruction work. The main railroad freight line runs from the Azerbaijani capital, Baku; and all but one of the main roads into the republic pass through Azerbaijan. Most important of all, Armenia is totally dependent on Azerbaijan for fuel. According to Radio Moscow, in August and September alone, 32,000 freight trains carrying food, fuel, and construction materials did not make it to Armenia as a result of sabotage by the Azeri nationalists.

Following Gorbachov’s ultimatum, in Karabakh troops took control of (and still continue to patrol) the water reservoir, and all stocks of gasoline and other fuels. The troops, acting as “escorting convoys,” continue to bring supplies into the region, and airlift food and other essential supplies by military planes and helicopters.

The two-month-long economic blockade has forced the Armenians into an almost total dependency on the Soviet military rations and handouts of daily necessities. Proud Armenia, one of the world’s oldest nations, is being turned into a “welfare republic.”

### **Near starvation and civil war**

The neglect of Armenia did not start with Moscow’s tolerance of a two-month blockade. In October, nearly a year after the earthquake, more than 500,000 Armenians are still homeless. Many face the prospect of a second winter in tents and huts. The Moscow leadership has done almost nothing to rebuild Armenia after the earthquake—despite hundreds of millions of dollars of foreign relief funds and hundreds of millions of rubles allocated for the purpose. TASS Oct. 6 reported that the cut-off of medical supplies had produced “the danger of a hepatitis epidemic” in Armenia and Karabakh, where “ties to the outside world” were still cut. The situation is the worst in remote areas, where “only through an airlift” has food arrived, and “starvation” avoided.

The picture of coming starvation and civil war was painted by the Soviet weekly *New Times* (no. 39) in

interviews with Arkady Volsky, chairman of the Special Administration Committee of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region and KGB Maj. Gen. Sergei Kupreyev, member of the Committee:

“. . . This year Nagorno-Karabakh has been hit by a drought. More than 90% of the grain crops have perished, the mountain pastures have dried out and the water reservoirs and canals have grown shallow. The population of cattle, pigs, and poultry is declining. . . . Armenia, which is itself short of vegetables, supplies tomatoes, while tomato crops are perishing on the farms in the NKAR. It is only under pressure from the Special Administration Committee that a small part of the crop has been delivered to be sold in the regional center,” said KGB Major General Kupreyev.

According to Arkady Volsky, the situation will have a spillover effect: “There were rumors of hunger in the NKAR. . . . In Azerbaijan, too, there were rumors that Azerbaijanis were starving in the NKAR. . . . This created a new apple of discord between the two nations. In general, 15 million people are involved in the Karabakh conflict. Many are surprised at the figure.

of 7 million, and Armenia of 3.5 million. That already makes 10.5 million. Many Armenians and Azerbaijanis live in Georgia. To these one should add the Armenians living in neighboring areas of Russia—Rostov, Stavropol, Krasnodar and in Moscow. There are many mixed Armenian-Azerbaijani communities.”

On top of the drought, there are periodic interruptions of Karabakh’s drinking water supplies, most of which are piped in from Azerbaijani-inhabited areas. As *New Times* emphasized: “There is a ‘quiet war’ for water whose supplies were erratic even in peacetime in Stepanakert. Now there are constant interruptions in the supply of drinking water because the main sources are in the Azerbaijan areas. Sometimes water is on only a couple of hours a day. Electric energy is also distributed from a center in Agdam outside Nagorno-Karabakh. During a blackout one could not help thinking of how a similar situation is handled on Cyprus where there is a long-running feud between the Greek and Turkish communities.”

The Soviet media, following the Sept. 19-20 Central Committee plenum, compared the conflict to the years-long Christian-Muslim civil war in Lebanon and the protracted Turkish-Greek ethnic conflict on Cyprus. A protracted conflict is on the agenda. This was underscored by Arkady Volsky, speaking to *New Times*: “The short-term outlook is very bleak. . . . There are dead end situations in the world. Take, for instance, Lebanon, Beirut. For 20 years considerable intelligence has gone into attempts to resolve this problem. Everything has been tried—the introduction of American forces, French forces, the Syrian contingent, the Green Line. The quest for a way out continues, but the situation is still at an impasse.”