

Shooting death of Armenian prime minister heightens crisis in the Caucasus

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The killing of Armenian Prime Minister Vazgen Sarkisyan and other leading politicians in Wednesday's attack by nationalist terrorists has plunged the country into crisis. Armenia's Defence Ministry immediately demanded the sacking of top law enforcement officials. Its statement read, "Those who allowed this crime to happen are responsible before the Armenian nation.... The situation which has been created is fraught with uncertainty, the internal and external security of the state is in danger."

The parliament building was cordoned off by hundreds of police after four gunmen charged into the delegates' chamber in the capital of Yerevan at 5:15 p.m. They opened fire and announced they were staging a coup d'etat. Other victims included Karen Demirchian, the parliamentary speaker, Yuri Bakhshian and Ruben Miroian, deputy speakers, Leonard Petrosian, Armenia's emergencies minister, and at least four others.

The gunmen surrendered to police on Thursday morning, releasing 40 hostages, after all-night negotiations with Armenia's President Robert Kocharian. The president promised the gunmen safe passage and a fair trial.

Their leader is Nairi Unanian, a nationalist and former journalist. His brother and uncle were also involved in the attack. Unanian had been a member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, popularly known as Dashnak, but the group said he had been expelled several years ago and denied any link with the attack.

Dashnak is seen as having friendly relations with the government. Previously a proscribed organisation, Sarkisyan reversed the ban on Dashnak after he came to power and invited leading members into the government.

The gunmen, in their own statements, focused their denunciations of the government on worsening poverty and rampant corruption. An Armenian journalist who was in the parliament quoted one of the gunmen as saying,

"We have come to avenge those who have drunk the blood of the nation."

Unanian himself told local television the attack on the legislature was aimed at triggering a popular revolt. "In this country, it is not possible to create a political organisation.... The people have no way to go." He had acted to save Armenia from disintegration. "The country is in a catastrophic situation. People are hungry and the government doesn't offer any way out," he said.

A recorded statement by the gunmen was broadcast on Armenian television before they agreed to surrender. In the statement, Unanian said the assault had been intended to kill only Sarkisyan and the other deaths were "mistakes".

Prime Minister Sarkisyan was due to present a three-year economic reform plan to parliament in the coming weeks, based on plans drawn up by the World Bank earlier this month. The Bank has agreed to lend Armenia \$238 million in return for an economic restructuring program involving substantial cuts in social subsidies to an already devastated population. At present the country's Gross Domestic Product is just \$600 per capita.

Concerns amongst Western political leaders focused on fears that the attack would undermine attempts to resolve the long-running dispute with neighbouring Azerbaijan over the Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. US President Bill Clinton said Sarkisyan's death was a "real blow to that country and that region.... We have a good relationship with Armenia and we have done a lot of work with Armenia and Azerbaijan to try to resolve the difficulties surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh."

Sarkisyan, a one-time Soviet official, was appointed Armenian prime minister last June after helping President Kocharyan to power. Kocharyan had campaigned on a nationalist platform, accusing his predecessor, Levon Ter-Petrosian, of pursuing "defeatist" policies regarding independence for Nagorno-Karabakh by agreeing to

discuss returning the territory to Azerbaijan.

Sarkisyan himself was a long-time member of Armenia's nationalist movement, aiming for independence of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan. Following Nagorno-Karabakh's declaration of independence in 1988, Sarkisyan was the commander of the Nagorno-Karabakh volunteers and later Armenia's defence minister.

But he and the government have been under increasing pressure to reach an agreement with Azerbaijan. Less than two hours before the parliament building was stormed, US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott left Yerevan after holding talks with Sarkisyan and Kocharyan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Earlier in the week he met with Azeri President Haidar Aliyev to discuss the conflict, and he was scheduled to hold talks on the matter in Russia and France.

About 35,000 people were killed and a million left homeless in the war that erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh in the final years of the Soviet Union. A cease-fire was signed between Azerbaijan and the Armenian separatists in 1994, leaving Nagorno-Karabakh under effective Armenian control, along with surrounding Azeri territory. However, hostilities continued.

Talks presided over by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) failed to produce an agreement. While Azerbaijan offered wide-ranging autonomy, the Armenians demanded full independence.

This failure of the European powers encouraged an increasingly open intervention by the US. The entire Caucasus region has been the focus of conflicting schemes by America and Europe over developing an East-to-West transport corridor for oil and natural gas—from Central Asia and the Caspian Sea via the Caucasus to the Black Sea and Europe.

Politics in the region are dominated by the struggle for control of the oil routes vital to the exploitation of energy reserves in the former Soviet republics. Western transnational companies are competing for the lion's share of trillions of dollars in raw materials, including the world's greatest untapped oil reserves in the republics bordering the Caspian Sea, including Azerbaijan, as well as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The US Department of Energy estimates that 163 billion barrels of oil and up to 337 trillion cubic feet of natural gas are to be found there. Analysts also expect the Caspian region to become a major gold producer.

Strobe Talbott's shuttle diplomacy is part of the US government's efforts to secure its dominant role in the

region, and establish the stability necessary for commercial operations to go ahead. The US State Department indicated it was hopeful a framework for agreement would be in place prior to the Istanbul summit of the OSCE in November.

Russia has become increasingly unhappy over US and European designs on territories it once dominated or controlled. Its active role in the region's various disputes led to accusations of possible Russian involvement in Wednesday's attack from within the Armenian government. First Deputy Foreign Minister Khalaf Khalafov told the press, "I can't exclude that this was initiated by outside forces that want to destabilise the country during the Nagorno-Karabakh talks." "Outside forces" in the political lexicon of the Caucasus is usually seen as alluding to Russia.

The speculation and concerns surrounding the attack—even if the gunmen turn out have been acting alone—are indicative of the extreme volatility, not just of Armenia, but the entire Caucasus. The bloody events of Wednesday are symptomatic of the terrible economic, social and political decline produced by the collapse of the USSR—itself the result of the ruinous policy of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the drive of the imperialist powers to gain access to Soviet resources. Mass poverty, unemployment, government repression, crime, economic and social disintegration have been the lot of the broad masses of the former Soviet Union, while the separatist forces once hailed by Western governments as the seedbed of a new democracy threaten the complete destabilisation of the region.



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