

After four days of fighting, Azerbaijan, Armenia call Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire

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Azerbaijan and Armenia declared a ceasefire under heavy international pressure yesterday in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. After four days of intense fighting, tensions remain high amid fears that the fighting could trigger a broader war in the region.

The four days of fighting between two nations cost the lives of 40 troops and six civilians, and more than 200 wounded. The fighting was the most intense since a 1994 Russian-brokered ceasefire.

Yesterday mediators from Russia, France and the United States met in Vienna to discuss the conflict. The French Foreign Ministry said that France, the US and Russia would send envoys to visit Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault called for an immediate ceasefire, saying the conflict could not be resolved by force.

On Monday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry held a phone talk calling for an immediate resumption of the ceasefire. “Topic number one was to discuss efforts to secure an immediate end of the violence that has erupted along the Nagorno-Karabakh line of conflict,” said US State Department deputy spokesman Mark Toner. Toner said Washington encouraged Armenia and Azerbaijan to resume settlement talks and to avoid further escalation.

Nagorno-Karabakh, a majority-Armenian mountainous region in Azerbaijan, declared independence in 1991. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh began in 1988, when Azerbaijan and Armenia were still republics of the Soviet Union, and escalated into a full-scale war in the early 1990s, after the Stalinist bureaucracy restored capitalism and dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991. The war between Azeri troops and Armenian separatists killed some 30,000 people by the time of the 1994 ceasefire.

Doubts persist as to how long the ceasefire will be

effective, as tensions between both countries remain high and the fighting could re-explode in a region destabilized by imperialist wars and where reactionary regimes seek to distract rising social anger by sowing ethnic conflict.

Azerbaijan and Armenia blamed each other for the recent fighting. However, it is becoming ever clearer that the Azeri regime launched a bid to reconquer the disputed region with backing from Turkey. The Nagorno-Karabakh authorities, supported by Armenia, are trying to retake areas seized by the Azeri troops. This threatens to escalate into all-out war between Armenia’s main backer, Russia, and Turkey, and behind Turkey the entire NATO alliance.

On Monday, the Azeri regime accused Armenia of launching intensive shelling and announced that its forces had been put on full battle readiness, with an aim to strike further inside the disputed territory. The Azeri defense ministry declared, “Despite repeated warnings from the defence ministry, Armenia leaves no other way to Azerbaijan but [to] take appropriate retaliatory measures in response to its inhuman steps.”

Defence Minister Zakir Hasanov warned that Azeri troops were prepared for a major attack on Stepanakert (also known as Hankendi, population 50,000), the capital and largest city of the Nagorno-Karabakh, if separatists did “not stop shelling our settlements.”

“The defense minister gave the order to all troops including rocket-artillery troops to be prepared to deliver crushing blows to Hankendi and other occupied Azeri cities with the use of heavy combat equipment if the enemy side does not stop striking our populated areas,” Hasanov said.

On Monday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Turkey has supported Azerbaijan’s efforts to reassert its control in Nagorno-Karabakh and

will continue to do so. Referring to the death of 12 Azeri troops, Erdogan said, “[T]he fire of Armenia’s massacres in Karabakh continues to burn in our hearts. Karabakh will surely be returned to its rightful owner, Azerbaijan, one day.”

The *Wall Street Journal* quoted David Babayan, an official in Nagorno-Karabakh, charging that “Turkish instructors had assisted Azeri forces. Azerbaijan couldn’t take that kind of initiative on its own.”

Armenia responded with its own reactionary saber-rattling, threatening an “adequate strike” if Azerbaijan continued shelling in Nagorno-Karabakh. On Monday, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan declared that his country would continue to provide security for Nagorno-Karabakh. He also threatened to recognize Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent state if the fighting escalated.

“Being a participant in the 1994 ceasefire agreement, the Republic of Armenia will continue to fully carry out its obligations in providing security for the population in Nagorny-Karabakh. Moreover, I have tasked the Foreign Ministry to start working on a military cooperation treaty with Karabakh,” Sargsyan said.

He also warned that the fighting could trigger a wider war in the region, saying that the conflict threatens “security and stability not only in the South Caucasus, but also in the European region.”

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict adds fuel to the fires provoked across the Middle East and the Caucasus by decades of interventions led by the imperialist powers.

Conflicts between the NATO powers and Russia have escalated over the NATO proxy war to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a key Russian ally, as well as by the NATO-backed, fascist-led coup that toppled pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine in 2014. Relations between Turkey and Russia collapsed after Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet in Syria, a blatant act of war aimed to signal its disapproval of Russia’s intervention in the region to back Assad.

The *Washington Post* pointed to dangers of broader escalation and criticized both Turkey and Russia, writing that the Russian intervention in Syria “had a disastrous impact on Turkish policy. It’s not surprising that Turkish-Russian animosity would shadow another conflict in their respective back yards—one which happens to be taking place over a vital transit route of

oil and gas to Europe.”

The war danger posed by the Nagorno-Karabakh emerges from the catastrophic consequences of the dissolution of the USSR, and the reactionary nationalist politics that predominate in all the former Soviet republics, including Russia. This provided the basis for the emergence of explosive ethnic conflicts and imperialist intervention across the region.

With the Azeri economy largely dependent on Caspian oil and gas, Baku has been hit hard by the recent massive collapse in oil prices. One in every seven banks in the country has closed. Under these conditions, it appears that the Baku regime has turned to war in an attempt to divert attention from the escalating social crisis in the country by inciting ethnic Azeri sentiment.

The *Washington Post* cited University of Birmingham researcher Kevork Oskanian as saying that Azerbaijan, “under pressure to ‘liberate’ the region, has become disillusioned with the deadlocked negotiations, and the recent fall in oil prices has hit Azerbaijan’s economy hard.”

Thomas de Waal, senior associate at the Carnegie Europe think tank, wrote a piece for the BBC on the fighting, declaring, “This kind of operation would have the additional benefit of distracting the Azerbaijani population from the economic woes caused by falling oil prices.” He added, “[I]f the ceasefire breaks down, there are no peacekeepers, and even if you don’t have a full-scale war there could be low-intensity fighting which completely destroys the peace process.”



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