Russia, Turkey negotiate cease-fire in Armenian-Azeri war over Karabakh

Alex Lantier
12 November 2020

On November 10, a cease-fire backed by Moscow and Ankara went into effect in the six-week war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. Unlike previous truces negotiated by Russian, French and US officials which collapsed immediately, this cease-fire has so far held. This appears to be largely because, unlike previous ceasefires, it has support from the Azeri government and its main international backer, Turkey.

The two former Soviet republics have repeatedly waged fratricidal wars over the Karabakh, which first broke out in 1988 in the run-up to the Stalinist regime's 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union. Whereas Armenia took over the Nagorno-Karabakh in the 1988-1994 war, however, the current cease-fire agreed by Russian, Armenian and Azeri officials makes substantial concessions to Azeri territorial demands, handing much of the Karabakh to Azerbaijan.

Recent weeks saw major Azeri advances, relying on devastating strikes from Turkish and Israeli high-altitude drones. Evading Armenia's older air defense systems with tactics worked out against Syrian and Russian forces in the decade-long NATO proxy war in Syria, they destroyed Armenian missile batteries, artillery and armored vehicles. After Azeri forces reported this weekend that they had captured Shusha, Nagorno-Karabakh's second-largest city, Armenia agreed to a ceasefire.

According to the truce, Armenian and Azeri troops are to initially remain on their current positions. As 1,960 Russian peacekeepers with armored vehicles and equipment deploy along the contact line, however, Armenian troops will withdraw. Armenia will retain those parts of the Karabakh it currently holds, including the capital, Stepanakert. It must also return to Azerbaijan the districts of Agdam and Kalbajar, which it took over during the 1988-1994 war, by November 20.

The deal also calls to secure complex land routes through the mountainous region. Azerbaijan is to guarantee the security of the Lachin Corridor linking Stepanakert to Shusha and then to Armenia. The corridor will be patrolled by Russian peacekeepers. Armenia will guarantee the security of land routes from Azerbaijan via Armenia to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, a landlocked Azeri-administered enclave separated from Azerbaijan by Armenian territory.

This shaky cease-fire, even if it holds, will not resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which the region's capitalist regimes have proven incapable of resolving for three decades. Not only does it leave the way open to more aggressive nationalist elements on both sides to advance claims on the entire enclave, but it is likely to trigger new population displacements. Armenian authorities have only 10 days to abandon regions they have held for a quarter century.

This comes after a new, massive loss of life in the latest war. Russian officials have stated, based on estimates privately communicated to them by Azeri and Armenian officials, that at least 5,000 people died in the war from September 27 to October 22. Official Azeri or Armenian casualty totals have still not been published, however. Moreover, Azeri forces' advances and Armenian bombardments also forced an estimated 90,000 Armenians and 40,000 Azeris to flee their homes.

Nonetheless, officials across the region applauded the deal, which Turkish official sources said was negotiated on Saturday between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an. Kremlin press secretary Dmitri Peskov applauded the "not insignificant efforts" involved.

The Foreign Ministry of Iran, which like Russia has traditionally supported Armenia, declared that it was "content about the signing of an agreement" and expressed "hope that the agreement would lead to the final arrangements for long-lasting peace in the Caucasus."

After Azeri President Ilham Aliyev hailed the ceasefire as being "of historical importance" and a "capitulation" by Armenia, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar visited the Azeri capital, Baku yesterday and declared: "The present situation is very pleasing for us. This operation is an

© World Socialist Web Site

awakening ... The Azeri army has shown its power to the whole world."

In Armenia, where the government had largely hidden its growing military setbacks, protesters stormed the parliament and beat parliamentary speaker Ararat Mizoyan.

The cease-fire is a humiliating defeat for Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Elected in 2018 after mass protests against former Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan, he advanced a chauvinist platform demanding full international recognition of Armenian authority over the Karabakh.

Pashinyan announced on Facebook the cease-fire handing over much of the Karabakh to Azerbaijan, calling it "unspeakably painful." He continued, "The decision is made basing [sic] on the deep analyses of the combat situation and in discussion with best experts of the field. … This is not a victory but there is not defeat until you consider yourself defeated. We will never consider ourselves defeated and this shall become a new start of an era of our national unity and rebirth."

Pashinyan had to hide as protesters stormed his official residence, tearing his nameplate off his office door and chanting, "Nikol betrayed us."

Middle East Eye reporters at protests in Yerevan saw a woman shout at riot police: "I have lost all my relatives. I have lost my house. What are you going to do about it?" Another man, a former Armenian inhabitant of the Nagorno-Karabakh, who fought in the 1988-1994 war but had to flee to Yerevan in the current war, approved the cease-fire: "If we had carried on, we would only have lost. Many more people would have been killed."

The Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union proved to have disastrous geopolitical consequences, throwing the Middle East and Central Asia open to bloody ethnic conflict and imperialist wars.

Enormous uncertainty still hangs over the cease-fire. As Russia and Turkey wage proxy wars as they back rival sides in the civil wars triggered by NATO intervention in both Libya and Syria, Azeri forces shot down a Russian Mi-24 on November 9. Baku subsequently called it a "tragic mistake." The Kremlin also appeared to contradict Turkish claims that they would deploy peacekeepers to enforce the ceasefire, saying that only Russian peacekeepers would be deployed.

Perhaps the greatest danger comes from the explosive political crisis in Washington after the 2020 elections, and the risk of new US wars in the region. As Trump launches a coup trying to remain in office even after Democrat Joe Biden won the vote, both Trump and Biden have signaled a highly aggressive policy. While Trump nearly went to war with Iran last year, the Democratic Party has relentlessly demanded aggression against Russia, denouncing Trump as a Russian agent.

Significantly, both Russia and Iran have warned against CIA-backed Syrian Islamist militias who were transported from the Syrian war to Azerbaijan with tacit Turkish support. Iranian state-run IRNA agency warned that "the Islamic Republic's firm response to the terrorists should they transgress against the Iranian borders is a calculated, firm and strategic position. … If after having expelled the [Al Qaeda-linked militias] from Syria and Iraq, some people help their deployment in Iranian borders, they have certainly made a grave mistake."

Russia, whose war-torn regions of Chechnya and Dagestan also border Azerbaijan, made similar warnings. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called to "prevent the transfer of mercenaries, whose number in the conflict zone, according to available data, is already approaching 2,000. In particular, Putin raised the issue during a phone call with Turkish President Erdo?an on October 27 and during regular conversations with leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia."

Concerns are mounting in Russia's post-Soviet capitalist oligarchy that this truce could prove to be not the end but the beginning of a regional war across the former territory of the Soviet Union. This was the subject of the financial daily *Vedomosti* 's article yesterday titled "How Russia Lost the Second Karabakh War."

Warning that Ankara's successful support for the ethnic-Turkic Azeris would encourage "pan-Turkic plans," it wrote: "The balance of power in Turkic republics of Central Asia will also change radically … There is no doubt that Turkic nationalist and separatist groups inside Russia itself will also act more strongly." It added, "Also we must suppose that this operation, judging from its execution, was not planned by the Azeris, or even by the Turks."

Noting that the NATO-backed regime in Ukraine is now purchasing Turkish drones as it pursues its conflict with Russia in eastern Ukraine, *Vedomosti* called for a Russian build-up of "loitering weapons and strike drones." It added, "The Armenian catastrophe of 2020 must serve as a warning to others, so that we do not end up learning a similar lesson."

These statements are urgent warnings of the necessity of a struggle against ethnic nationalism and its encouragement by Stalinist forces, and the building of an international and socialist, that is to say Trotskyist, anti-war movement against imperialism among workers across the region and the world.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site