



EVENTS NEAR AGHDAM OR "KHOJALY EVENTS"

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On the night of 25th to 26th February, 1992, following months of complete blockade and heavy shelling of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) capital, Stepanakert, NKR armed units started a military operation to take out artillery positions and bring the blockade of Stepanakert to an end, because Khojaly served as one of the positions used by Azerbaijani troops in the siege of Stepanakert.

On that same night, 12 kilometres away from Khojaly, in the area near the town of Aghdam, controlled by Azerbaijani forces, civiliansⁱ were found dead and many aspects of these events still remain contended to this dayⁱⁱ.

Aiming at minimising civilian casualties, the Armenian side timely informed Azerbaijanis about the military operation, and provided a corridor for civilians to get to safety. The casualties near Aghdam resulted, however, mainly from the Azerbaijani Special Purpose Police Unit (OMON)ⁱⁱⁱ, which accompanied civilians fleeing Khojaly area, avoiding the designated corridor and encountering Armenian forces, exchanging barrages of fire with them, and effectively bringing civilians into the crossfire.

This short paper aims to address some of the most contentious issues of these events happened near Aghdam.

The background of the Khojaly Operation – siege of Stepanakert

Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, was under siege since November 1991. “By the winter of 1991-92, as a result of Azerbaijan’s three-year economic and transport blockade, Nagorno Karabakh was without fuel (though it did have natural gas), electricity, running water, functioning sanitation facilities, communications facilities, and most consumer goods.”^{iv} The civilians of Stepanakert were facing a serious humanitarian crisis.

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of NKR, 227 people were killed and 391 people were injured in Stepanakert during the winter of 1992 alone.^v The city suffered the fate similar to that which, two years later, led UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to formally request NATO forces to carry out air strikes against troops holding Sarajevo besieged.

However, unlike in the case of Sarajevo, the international community knew little about the plight of people in Stepanakert; it was not until May 1992, when Helsinki Watch [nowadays Human Rights Watch] arrived to the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Early warning and the safe corridor aimed at preventing civilian casualties

Facing a humanitarian catastrophe in Stepanakert, Armenian forces realised they had to make a counter-offensive, break the siege and liberate the airport near Khojaly. To prevent loss of innocent lives, starting from the end of January, Armenians kept warning about the impending military operation, asking Azerbaijanis to evacuate civilians, even communicating the exact date of the attack.^{vi}

In a 1992 interview with the “Nezavisimaya Gazeta”, the first President of Azerbaijan, Ayaz Mutalibov, emphasised that: “...a corridor was left open by the Armenians for the civilians to leave”^{vii}. In 1992, in his interview to “Russkaya Mysl’”, Khojaly Mayor Elman Mammadov admitted Azerbaijanis “knew about the existence of humanitarian corridor”^{viii}.

Azerbaijani OMON unit, in charge of Khojaly airport and its defence since 1990, decided, for unknown reasons^x, to evacuate a part of the population not using the provided corridor, but a path leading to Aghdam, controlled by the forces of the Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF)^x.

This intermingled group of military personnel and civilians, without clear signs of civilian presence or the nature of their move^{xi}, engaged Armenians and troops of the CIS 366th regiment^{xii} near Nakhichevanik village^{xiii}.

Finally, according to sources on both sides, more than 700 civilians of Khojaly, mainly women and children, detained by Armenian forces in the city or on the way to Aghdam, were unharmed, and transferred to Azerbaijani side, confirming there was no intent on Armenian side to harm civilians.^{xiv}

Khojaly tragedy as an instrument in Azerbaijani internal politics

From the beginning of 1992, the central government in Baku and President Mutalibov have lost control of regional events in Nagorno-Karabakh and military operations were headed by the representatives of the APF.^{xv}

On 5 March 1992, during the session of Milli Mejlis (National Assembly of Azerbaijan), the APF demanded to show the video materials taken in Khojaly by Azerbaijani photo journalist Chingiz Mustafayev.^{xvi} The ensuing popular revolt, sparked by the showcase of the materials, threatened to turn into an uprising, forcing President Mutalibov to resign the following evening.^{xvii}

In his 2009 interview to "Azadlig",^{xviii} the head of the Azerbaijani Investigation Commission of Khojaly events Ramiz Fatalayev, said there were attempts to politicise and influence the work of the Commission and to either acquit or heavily persecute those in Azerbaijan responsible for the "Khojaly" events. He assessed these events took place "for some political reasons and for the maintenance of power".^{xix}

Fatalayev stressed that on 22 February a meeting of the National Security council took place in the presence of the president, the prime minister, the chairman of the Committee for State Security and others, and that during that meeting a decision was made not to evacuate the people of Khojaly.

Conclusions

1. Khojaly operation was aimed at contravening the humanitarian crisis stemming from a long-lasting siege of Stepanakert.
2. Armenian side ensured a safe corridor for civilians and timely warned Azerbaijani authorities of the impending operation. Civilians from Khojaly were transferred unharmed to Azerbaijan after the town came under Armenian control.
3. Aghdam or "Khojaly" events were used as a political instrument in the internal power struggle in Azerbaijan.
4. The lack of international presence and engagement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resulted in a plethora of Aghdam or "Khojaly" events interpretations, suited to feed different narratives
5. Baku insists on portraying the events near Aghdam as "genocide" by Armenian forces, fuelling [hate speech and war rhetoric](#).
6. Continued absence of the international community [limited to the work of the OSCE Minks group] on the ground in the region raises fears, in the context of the Azerbaijani warmongering rhetoric and repeated violations of the ceasefire, those events near Aghdam may be used as a *casus belli* and a cause for severe retaliation against Armenians in NK.

ⁱ Numbers have been disputed, varying from between 200 and 300, as reported by the Helsinki Watch referring to then Azerbaijani authorities [Bloodshed in the Caucasus : escalation of the armed conflict in Nagorno Karabakh, September 1992, https://ia801205.us.archive.org/31/items/bub_gb_ywAU3VomlpkC/bub_gb_ywAU3VomlpkC.pdf, p. 23.] to over 600, according to the Azerbaijani current administration [Khojaly Genocide, <http://mfa.gov.az/en/content/795?options=content&id=850>]

ⁱⁱ Even renowned experts on the region, such as Thomas De Waal, have had a change of heart over the nature and certain aspects of Khojaly events. See video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrnlpbbJ9z4>

ⁱⁱⁱ According to De Waal, “The Defense Ministry [of Azerbaijan] had almost no control over the real fighting men of Azerbaijan: a plethora of armed groups, many of which were essentially the personal militias of opposition leaders.... It was obvious that these men had arms not just to fight the Armenians but to take part in the power struggles for Azerbaijan itself”, Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, New York and London, 2004 p. 164.

^{iv} Bloodshed in the Caucasus : escalation of the armed conflict in Nagorno Karabakh, September 1992, https://ia801205.us.archive.org/31/items/bub_gb_ywAU3VomlpkC/bub_gb_ywAU3VomlpkC.pdf, p. 12.

^v See : Доклад Правозащитного Центра «Мемориал» о Массовых Нарушениях Прав Человека, Связанных с Занятием Населенного Пункта Ходжалы в ночь с 25 на 26 февраля 1992 г. Вооруженными Формированиями, <http://old.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/karabah/Hojaly/index.htm>, [in Russian].

^{vi} Russian newspaper “Sobesednik” mentioned: “Starting from the end of January Armenians kept warning about military operation asking to evacuate civilians. They even told the date of attack-February 25th”, see: Sobesednik, *Betrayal: once again about Khojaly tragedy*, p.18, 1992, [in Russian].

^{vii} Curtesy translation. See: *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 2 April 1992. The interview can be partly found on current website of the magazine: Сергей Звягин, Ходжалу: правда и вымыслы, 05.03.2010 , http://www.ng.ru/cis/2010-03-05/6_hojalu.html, [in Russian].

^{viii} Curtesy translation. See: *Russkaya Mysl*, 3 March, 1992. See also: Доклад Правозащитного Центра «Мемориал» о Массовых Нарушениях Прав Человека, Связанных с Занятием Населенного Пункта Ходжалы в ночь с 25 на 26 февраля 1992 г. Вооруженными Формированиями, <http://old.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/karabah/Hojaly/index.htm>, [in Russian].

^{ix} The Azerbaijani journalist Eynulla Fatulayev wrote in “Karabakh Diary”: “...However, for the sake of fairness I will admit that several years ago I met some refugees from Khojaly, temporarily settled in Naftalan, who openly confessed to me that, on the eve of the large-scale offensive of the Russian and Armenian troops on Khojaly, the town had been encircled [by those troops]. And even several days prior to the attack, the Armenians had been continuously warning the population about the planned operation through loudspeakers and suggesting that the civilians abandon the town and escape from the encirclement through a humanitarian corridor along the Kar-Kar River. According to the Khojaly refugees' own words, they had used this corridor and, indeed, the Armenian soldiers positioned behind the corridor had not opened fire on them. Some soldiers from the battalions of the NFA [the National Front of Azerbaijan, a political party], for some reason, had led part of the [refugees] in the direction of the village of Nakhichevanik, which during that period had been under the control of the Armenians' Askeran battalion. The other group of refugees were hit by artillery volleys [while they were reaching] the Aghdam Region”. See: European Courts of Human Rights, *Case of Fatullayev v. Azerbaijan*, Application no. 40984/07, Strasbourg, 22 April, 2010.

^x ANS TV, *Ən Yeni Tarix*, 26.02.2001, <http://www.anstv.ws/site/video/7765-an-yeni-tarix-26-02-2001>, Accessed 20 May, 2017, [in Azerbaijani].

^{xi} Доклад Правозащитного Центра «Мемориал» о Массовых Нарушениях Прав Человека, Связанных с Занятием Населенного Пункта Ходжалы в ночь с 25 на 26 февраля 1992 г. Вооруженными Формированиями, <http://old.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/karabah/Hojaly/index.htm>, [in Russian].

^{xii} According to information received from the Armenian side, fighting vehicles of the 366th regiment and their crews took part in the assault on the town, shelling it but not entering the town itself. The Armenian side asserts that the participation of servicemen in military actions was not authorized by a written order from the regiment command. See: Доклад Правозащитного Центра «Мемориал» о Массовых Нарушениях Прав Человека, Связанных с Занятием Населенного Пункта Ходжалы в ночь с 25 на 26 февраля 1992 г. Вооруженными Формированиями, <http://old.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/karabah/Hojaly/index.htm>, [in Russian].

^{xiii} Bloodshed in the Caucasus : escalation of the armed conflict in Nagorno Karabakh, September 1992, https://ia801205.us.archive.org/31/items/bub_gb_ywAU3VomlpkC/bub_gb_ywAU3VomlpkC.pdf, p. 23-24.

^{xiv} Доклад Правозащитного Центра «Мемориал» о Массовых Нарушениях Прав Человека, Связанных с Занятием Населенного Пункта Ходжалы в ночь с 25 на 26 февраля 1992 г. Вооруженными Формированиями, <http://old.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/karabah/Hojaly/index.htm>

^{xv} See: Sobesednik, *Betrayal: once again about Khojaly tragedy*, p.18, 1992; Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, New York and London, 2004 p. 164.

^{xvi} ANS TV, *Ən Yeni Tarix* 01.03.2012, <http://www.anstv.ws/site/video/853-an-yeni-tarix-01-03-2012>, Accessed 20 May, 2017, [in Azerbaijani]

^{xvii} Azerbaijani president resigns, March 6, 1992, <http://www.upi.com/Archives/1992/03/06/Azerbaijani-president-resigns/8325699858000/>

^{xviii} «Siyasi uzaqqörənliyin olmaması Xocalı hadisəsinə gətirib çıxırdı», *Sentyabr* 09, 2009, <https://www.azadliq.org/a/1818751.html>, Accessed 6 May, 2017, [in Azerbaijani].

^{xix} Ibid.