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EVERYTHING YOU NEVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT AZERBAIJAN: Part Two

Slithering in the Swamp (or the Creeping Coup)

Dear Peter,

Last September, when I sent you a letter made up of news stories that never saw the light of day there were some complaints from your friends who said that the project was by definition not interesting--it wasn't just yesterday's papers, it was copy that hadn't made the grade.

Well, here I am at it again--but with the specific purpose of providing material for the historical record about the political and social roller-coaster ride in Azerbaijan this Spring. My rational for putting together such a piece is less frustration and ego gratification than an interest in maintaining a diary of events for future foot noting, beginning with the resignation of former president Ayaz Mutaibov on March 6th and ending with the election of Abulfaz Elchibey on June 7th.

You are familiar with both of these seminal events in the contemporary history of Azerbaijan--if not from international news coverage provided by wire service agencies and radio, then at least from two recent ICWA newsletters to you: 'Everything You Never Wanted To Know About Azerbaijan: Part One', that detailed the roller coaster ride up to the Mutaibov resignation and 'An Interview With Azerbaijan President Abulfaz Elchibey', that attempted to capture the thoughts of the president-apparent immediately after the elections of June 7th.

But now I want to give you the in-between.

And rather than roll it all into a narrative, I have once again chosen the vehicle of stringing together a series of press reports. It is almost incidental that most are unpublished. They are history.

A little background, both personal and professional, might be in order.

Thomas Goltz is an ICWA fellow researching the Turkic-speaking republics of the former USSR, with an emphasis on Azerbaijan

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

In the wake of the Xojali 1) Massacre of February 25/6, I informed the Washington Post that I would not be filing news for them anymore and contacted the New York Times about 'stringing' for them instead. The Times said they were interested, and I began a long series of files. Honestly, though, I don't know how much ever got in the paper; very little, I believe.

Often, stories I wrote could not be filed because of bad communications; other times the files were not collected because the hour was too late; sometimes I knew I was filing far too much for any possible use, but just wanted someone out there to have a reference point questioning conventional wisdom. I wrote and filed (or tried to file) knowing it was usually going to be in vain...

But that was almost a matter of indifference to me because the intent to file became a sort of political diary writing and I continued because it was an important time in Azerbaijan history and few or no other journalists were writing about events or were getting them so hopelessly distorted or wrong that I decided that I had to create a counter-balance for future historians.

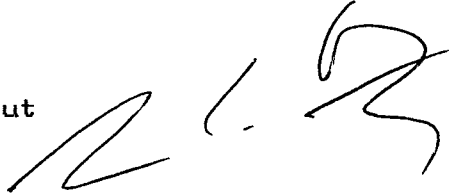
So please, in reading and criticizing these dispatches, do not think I am just whining about stories that never got printed; rather I am trying to produce a document of dispatches.

I pick up, almost arbitrarily, with my last file to the Washington Post concerning the resignation of Azerbaijan President Ayaz Mutalibov on March 6th, a Friday. The story never got into print because after all the theatrics involved in resigning, my telephone went dead for two days and I was unable to get the story through. When I came back on line with an updated swan-song on Sunday, the Post rather stiffly (and not surprisingly) informed me that they had 'used the wires' and were not interested in the story. 2)

Thus, most of the following was filed (or at least written) with the New York Times in mind. There were also a couple of files designed for the London Sunday Times, the Hamburg Stern as well as the South North News Service.

I have dusted most copy for typos and inconsistent spelling of names, but not content. Here goes...

Thomas Goltz
Salisbury Connecticut
June 18th 1992



1) The new, Latin-based spelling for the town I used to write as Hodjali and most continue to write as Khodjaly.

2) There was a certain poetic justice in this going out with a whimper and not a bang, all things considered. There were other issues involved, but much of my dissatisfaction with the foreign desk of the Post was based on the sense that what I was filing was either getting spiked or twisted. Months later, I was able to see my clips from the period and feel obliged to retract much of the criticism of the desk at the time and mutter an apology. Sorry, David (Ignatius)--you did keep your paper out front.

March 8th 1992

As old communist government in Azerbaijan crumbles, the Popular Front emerges as leading institution

by Thomas Goltz

Baku--In the wake of last week's resignation of President Ayaz Mutalibov, the Popular Front of Azerbaijan has emerged as the key player in internal and external politics of this oil-rich former Soviet Republic.

In addition to calling for direct talks with Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh, the leadership of the broad-based opposition organization is also putting together a 'hit list' of top officials of the Mutalibov regime to be excluded from future office or civil responsibility.

"They all must go," said Popular Front spokesman Niyazi Ibrahim, "The (former communist elite) were the people that lead us into our current predicament and none are deserving of public trust. Many are outright traitors."

Mutalibov, Azerbaijan Communist Party chief for two years before the party was dissolved last September, resigned Friday in the face of massive protest organized by the Front over the Xojali Massacre of February 26th, when upwards of 1,000 Azeri Turks from the small Azeri enclave town inside the Armenian enclave of Nagorno Karabakh were killed, allegedly by Armenian militants backed up by elements of the (former) Soviet army of the Ministry of the Interior, or MVD.

In addition to being accused of criminal negligence in allowing the town to fall and not rescuing victims while there was still time, the government is also accused of initially lying about the extent of the tragedy and then willfully abusing the memory of those killed by promoting the massacre to regain public support.

The result has been a total collapse of trust in the government and a de facto transfer of real power from the presidential palace and parliament to the offices of the Front.

As a reflection of this change, Mr Abulfaz Elchibey, the chairman of the Front, was able to address the country on national television for the first time on Sunday night following the forced resignation of the head of programming due to his involvement in the suppression of news.

(As a concession from the government to the opposition earlier in the year, Elchibey has been previously shown on television, but never heard from or identified. With the exception of interviews in the small opposition press, neither have his views been expressed in the state-controlled print media.)

On Sunday night, with advance notice of the programming in the evening news, Elchibey delivered a detailed, 50 minute critique of past and present politics in Azerbaijan, leaving no stone unturned. While announcing that the Popular Front would not join in the transitional government now being formed to replace Mutalibov's cabinet, he said he encouraged individual members of the Front to participate in the new government so as to insure new and free parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan within six months. He also demanded that Mutalibov's immunity from

prosecution be lifted and that the former president be put on trial for crimes against the nation. Elchibey also suggested that all those over 45 years of age currently holding any position in government should be sacked because they had worked within the former communist system for too long, and that the stalled conversion of Azeri Turkish from Cyrillic script to Latin be done 'immediately.'

He also repeated many points made in an interview to this correspondent earlier in the day, namely, that the root cause of tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh lay not between the two countries but in Moscow, which, he said, continues to manipulate the smaller nations of the former Soviet Union that wish to break free.

"It is Russian imperialism that is responsible for the Xojali massacre," he said, "Even the Armenians understand now that the killers were Russians. We wrote them about this: the Russians attack an Armenian village and blame it on Azerbaijan and then attack an Azeri village and blame it on Armenians. The people who destroyed Xojali were members of Moscow's army, the 366th Brigade stationed in Stepanakert."

As such, Elchibey attempted to exculpate Armenia from responsibility in the massacre, save in the sense of Yerevan allowing itself to be used as a pawn by Moscow to de-stabilize the Caucasus. He also called for an immediate cease-fire, a withdrawal of all Armenian units from Karabakh and the establishment of the rule of law. He did not rule out mediation by outside powers, but stressed that the essential peace had to be made between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

"A dialogue must be begun between Baku and Yerevan," he said, "But if it serves the end of getting a dialogue started, then I would suggest including Turkey and the Ukraine as mediators. The Ukraine is a big country, a powerful country--and it understands the nature of the Soviet System that is ultimately responsible for this business. It understands Russia."

Elchibey also noted that including the Ukraine in the negotiations process would be useful because it is perceived as a 'Christian' country.

"There are those who want to make the tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan into a Muslim/Christian conflict," he said, "It is not, but to satisfy those with such concerns, let Ukraine be the 'Christian' mediator and let Turkey be the 'Muslim' mediator."

Elchibey categorically excluded Russia and Iran as a potential mediators between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

"They have not changed," he said of the Russians, "It is the same everywhere when the smaller people of the Russian empire want to become free. In Georgia, they first set the Osetians and the Abkhazians against Georgians, and then got the Georgians to fight among themselves. The same thing is happening in Daghestan, the same in Tataristan and Baskurdistan 3) and the same in Azerbaijan. The goal is not to get Azeris fighting Armenians, but to get Azeris fighting each other."

This was very nearly the case last Friday, when die-hard loyalists of former President Mutalibov tried to save his position by calling in the Soviet army to disperse a crowd of

3) All autonomous regions or republics in the Russian Federation

demonstrators demanding his removal, claiming that the demonstrators were armed and about to attack the building.

In fact, a number of women from an organization associated with the Popular Front had smashed several large windows of the parliament on Thursday after law-makers inside continued to dawdle over what measures needed to be taken in the wake of the Xojali massacre. Unopposed--and even encouraged--by police guards outside, they entered the chamber itself to heckle the assembly.

Then, apparently, Presidential spokesman Rasim Agaev and the leader of the quasi-opposition Social Democratic Party, Mr Zardush Alizade, signed an order in the name of the new chairman of parliament calling for a detachment of the (former) Soviet 4th Army still stationed in Baku to surround the parliamentary building and defend the law-makers.

The new chairman of parliament, Dr Yagub Mahmedov, in power little more than 24 hours, threatened to resign his post upon learning of the invitation. The order was recalled after a nationally-famous veteran threatened to use his side-arms to defend the "honor of the parliament" and personally fight off the "foreign troops". He also threatened to turn Baku into a "second Tbilisi" with the aid of armed elements associated with the Popular Front. 4)

Facing a potential bloodbath, Mutalibov resigned shortly afterward, asking for 'forgiveness' from the nation and promising to remove himself from politics 'forever'. He was conferred a 10,000 rouble (\$100) monthly stipend, a country vacation house, a security detachment and a car for his 'service to the nation'.

Diplomatic sources in the parliament at the time of the resignation say that the real sticking issue was the issue of immunity from prosecution for crimes against the state.

As the head of an oil-rich state notorious for its corruption at the highest levels, Mutalibov is believed to have substantial amounts of money salted away in a variety of accounts and to have taken advantage of the new privatization laws in Azerbaijan designed to free property from the ownership of the state and transfer it to individuals.

But with the demise of Mutalibov, a plethora of questions are now floating about what further heads will roll and to what extent the Front will play in the future of the country.

The Front has accepted that Prime Minister Hasan Hasanov be allowed to form a transitional government. But the Front has also demanded that real legislative power should be divested from the parliament--which remains dominated by Mutalibov loyalists--and returned to a 50 person parliamentary-body evenly divided between members of the Democratic Block and the old Communist Party known as the Milli Shura, or National Council.

The Front has also required that constitutional experts quickly draw up a new legal code for the country, to be passed by the National Council in preparation for new, general and local elections to be held within six months.

According to the constitution of Azerbaijan, the chairman of parliament is to act as president of the country for three months in the absence of the elected head of state. In the present political atmosphere, however, administrative power has devolved

4) Rahim Gaziev, hero of Shusha and soon-to-be Defense Minister

on current Prime Minister Hasanov, a former communist functionary now dressed in nationalist attire.

Hasanov established his anti-Mutalibov credentials last week by calling on the entire government--presumably himself included--to resign in the face of the Karabakh debacle.

"I am the Prime Minister but none of the other ministries are responsible to me," he told the anti-government newspaper Azadlik in a remarkably frank if self-serving interview, "ask them what they did in Karabakh, not me."

The key point, however, is the future role of the presidency, which the Front wants abolished because it 'lends itself to the establishment of a dictatorship.'

Mutalibov, the Azerbaijan Communist Party boss and thus national leader from 1990, claimed to be democratically elected last September when he won 87 percent of the popular vote in elections boycotted by the Popular Front and almost universally criticized as having been fraudulent.

In addition to his tenuous claim to legitimacy, Mutalibov was constantly the butt of jokes referring to him as being 'Mrs Ayaz' due to his slavishly loyal position to Moscow, his propensity to prioritize meetings with visiting oil executives over pressing political concerns and his puffy hair-do.



Ladies Associated With Popular Front in Parliament Stake-Out

12.3.92

Creeping Coup in Baku

Leaders of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan announced on Wednesday that they have no intention of joining the Commonwealth of Independent States, but may send a team of observers to the meeting of the former Soviet Republics in the Belorus city of Minsk on March 20th to discuss how to ease the exit of Azerbaijan from the "new empire."

"Mutalibov had no legal authority to sign the Commonwealth Treaty in the first place and it has not been ratified by parliament," said Isa Gamberov, a Popular Front member and the head of the opposition Democratic Bloc in parliament, "It is one of the many reasons why he was obliged to resign."

Speaking to journalists in a hastily-called press conference at the Front's Baku headquarters, Gamberov and deputy Front chairman Arif Hadjiev accused the former president of treason and demanded that the immunity from prosecution given him be lifted so that the former president could be prosecuted by the full weight of the law.

"The only decent act Mutalibov ever did was resign," said Hadjiev, "But the list of his crimes against the nation is such that a proper investigation must be carried and the maximum sentence imposed."

In addition to charging Mutalibov with criminal negligence in his handling of the Karabakh crisis, the Front accuses the former president of embezzlement, misuse of office and assisting in the organization of the January 20, 1990 crack-down, when the communist government invited the Soviet army of the interior to roll on Baku to put down anti-Armenian rioting. More than 200 Azeris were killed in the subsequent violence.

The two Front leaders also said that the organization would participate in a new coalition government now being formed by Prime Minister Hasan Hasanov, but only on the condition that the presidential apparatus be abolished and legislative power turned over to the Milli Shura, or National Council--a 50 person body equally divided between members of the parliamentary opposition and former communist party legislators.

Gamberov merely smiled when asked about the political future of the current acting president, Dr Yagub Mahmedov, known in Baku as 'Dollar Yagub' because of his tendency to lower entrance standards for cash at the medical faculty of Baku University. Gamberov also made it clear that the Front intends to conduct a general, political house-cleaning in which even members of the Front and the Democratic Block would not be spared.

"Mutalibov is gone but the rest of the current government is cut from the same cloth and have come down the same road," Gamberov said, "We haven't managed to overthrow the communist mafia yet. In the short term it is likely that things will get worse before they get better as the old elite tries to cling to power. But those responsible for the current crisis in Azerbaijan must go and cannot be allowed to lead again."

The picture of a creeping coup was also taken up by Popular Front Chairman Abulfaz Elchibey, who recently demanded an end to nepotism in government offices and even suggested that anyone over 45 years of age currently working in the bureaucracy be removed from their positions because those older are too 'tainted' by the system.

Elchibey, Azerbaijan's leading dissident during the 1970s, spent two years in a hard labor camp after being convicted of anti-Soviet activity and remains the heart and brain behind the Front despite failing health.

The pivotal figure on the governmental side in the current crisis is Prime Minister Hasan Hasanov, a former communist functionary who is now actively courting the Popular Front for support and embracing most of its positions. Hasanov even went so far as to seek a meeting with Elchibey, who he described as 'an extremely important personality' in Azerbaijan. 5)

5) The first hint that the government was about to enter into serious talks with Abulfaz came through my 'deep throat' source in the presidential apparatus, Vafa Goulizade, who came over to my house to declare his boss 'a traitor' even before Mutalibov resigned. 'There are only one honest man in Azerbaijan,' he said, 'Abulfaz Elchibey.' Two days later, a rumor passed down the grape-vine: Prime Minister Hasanov had sought an interview with Elchibey. That evening, there was a press conference between Hasanov and British Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Douglas Hogg, allegedly concerning the establishment of diplomatic relations but really about creating a venue to grandstand over Karabakh for the up-coming British elections. Not really interested in what Hogg had to say, I popped the following question to Hasanov: 'Sir, have you met with Abulfaz Elchibey to discuss your future government and the situation in the country?' 'We are talking about bilateral ties with the United Kingdom and not domestic affairs,' he snapped, and continued fielding other questions. But Hasanov has achieved his present status in the power structure by knowing when to dodge, he also knows when to jab: during the next hour of blather about bilateral ties, he had a good think and just as everyone was picking up their bags to go, he seized the microphone and looked me in the eye: 'Just a moment,' he said, 'I'd like to answer your question about my meeting with Abulfaz Elchibey.' Silence in the room, aside from the British delegation, who had no idea whom Hasanov was talking about, and thus kept muttering among themselves. 'We have been consulting with all concerned parties about the political situation in the country and have entered into discussions with Abulfaz Elchibey whom we regard as an important and respected member of Azeri society," said Hasanov, "I intend to pursue my initial contacts with Abulfaz because I greatly respect his person and his views. The negotiations will continue. Goodnight.' The government negotiating with Abulfaz? Details began to emerge and after a week a protocol was signed between Abulfaz, Hasanov and Mahmedov. The Front announced to its members that it was entering into a coalition government of national unity and Hasanov appointed three Front-inspired deputies to the key ministerial posts of Defense, the Interior and Print Press--before the rest of his cabinet was in place or even approved. Of great significance was the appointment of a new Minister of

Hasanov has also publicly embraced the Front position on Nagorno Karabakh, which has now spilled out of the territory into mainland Azerbaijan.

"No consultations with Armenia can begin until the Armenian state terrorist army withdraws from the 4,000 square kilometers of Azerbaijan that it has occupied," Hasanov declared during the course of a joint press conference held with visiting Deputy British Foreign Minister Douglas Hogg.

Hasanov echoed the Front position that the Armenian citizens of Nagorno Karabakh might enjoy cultural and local autonomy like many other minorities in other countries ranging from South Tyrol in Italy to Quebec in Canada, but that the West had to understand the difference between autonomy and independence.

Hogg thanked for his host for his 'robust support for the concept of autonomy.'

Meanwhile, Armenian units, presumably re-supplied by depots left behind by the departing 366th Brigade of the Ministry of the Interior Army that had been stationed in the Nagorno Karabakh capital of Stepanakert, mounted a serious attacks on Agdam, an Azeri city situated in the plain on the eastern border of the problematic territory.

The situation remains obscure, but journalists hiding in Agdam cellars from the shelling said that a number of Armenian tanks had punched through to a cemetery area just outside of Agdam and were 'shooting like mad'. A missile barrage this morning left at least five dead and many houses destroyed and on fire.

Defense: none other than the aforementioned Rahim Gaziev--the hero of Shusha and the man who stood down the Russian 4th Army with his pistol in parliament two weeks before. Mahmedov, meanwhile, in his capacity as acting president and chairman of parliament, called the body to re-convene in an emergency session. Officially, the deputies were to return to their seats to discuss such Karabakh-related issues as the defense of remaining Azeri settlements in the area, how to deal with the swarm of refugees in Baku and the criterion for one's becoming a 'Hero of Karabakh.' Everyone knew the real purpose, however: how to hand over legislative power to the National Council and how to dissolve or suspend the presidency.

16.8.92

Iran Brokers New Cease-Fire

Baku--Informed Sources in Baku confirm that Azerbaijan and Armenia, in an effort to brake escalating violence between the two former Soviet Republics over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh, have signed a temporary cease-fire agreement in the Iranian capital, Tehran.

The cease-fire agreement, signed on Sunday, is to take effect on March 20th and includes provisions for the exchange of prisoners and hostages as well as bodies.

It was brokered by Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, whose last initiative to end the fighting in Karabakh in late February was agreed to in principle by Armenia and Azerbaijan but was totally ignored by Armenian militiamen in Nagorno Karabakh, who were even then preparing to launch a major attack on the Azeri town of Xojali. The attack resulted in the massacre of hundreds of Azeri civilians.

Observers in Baku question whether the new initiative can be any more successful than the last or whether any of several other initiatives can halt the fighting so long as the men on the ground remain outside the control of the political leadership.

Previous cease-fires have been honored more in the breach than in the rule and usually only at specific points of contact between the Azeris and Armenians as a means of collecting the dead in exchange for motor fuel and even ammunition.

Fighting in the Lachin corridor, that separates Nagorno Karabakh from Armenia, continued last night as the Armenian forces attempted to seal off access to Shusha, the last Azeri town in Nagorno Karabakh. Other reports said that forces from Armenia had taken the border village of Khairli in northwestern Azerbaijan, over 100 miles away from Nagorno Karabakh itself.

The Iranian initiative, following a cease-fire call last week by President George Bush at the behest of the Turkish Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel, is the most recent mediation effort in the troubled territory, where over 2,000 Azeris and Armenians have been killed since 1988. Previously, Nagorno Karabakh enjoyed the status of being an autonomous territory, inside Azerbaijan until the majority Armenians announced their independence, presumably as the first step toward unity itself with Armenia.

Last December, Azerbaijan announced that it was dissolving the special autonomy status of Nagorno Karabakh and that the territory would become part of the larger Azeri province of Karabakh, in apparent violation of CSCE norms of member states respecting external and internal borders, a matter to be taken up by United Nations' special envoy Cyrus Vance during his imminent visit to the region.

21.3.92

Cyrus Vance

Post 19, Outside Agdam--Within minutes of the departure of the last Iranian peace mediators from Nagorno Karabakh Friday night, shooting started anew between Azeri and Armenia militiamen along the ill-defined no-man's land that separates them, resulting in the death of at least one Azeri.

The six Iranians, members of a delegation sent from Tehran to Baku and the Armenian capital of Yerevan, had stayed behind in Stepanakert several hours after the departure of United Nations special envoy Cyrus Vance in order to insure compliance of the first day of a planned seven day cease-fire begun at noon Friday.

In addition to creating conditions needed for Vance's fact-finding trip to the troubled territory, the cease-fire was also timed to correspond with the old Persian New Year, Novruz.

"We have made contact with both sides and both have said they will subscribe to the cease-fire," said one of the Iranian envoys,⁶ in an after-dark, car-window interview at Post 19, "We can only hope that it will hold."

But scant minutes after the Iranian mediators had passed Post 19--the last Azeri Turkish control point between the city of Agdam and the Armenian town of Askeron--small arms fire began crackling through the night from Armenian positions in the surrounding hills. The fire was returned by front-line Azeri militiamen belonging to the Shahinlar, or 'Falcons' volunteer group, associated with but structurally separate from the Azerbaijan national army.

One Falcon was killed in the exchange, which continued on for the next two hours.

In distinction to the Iranian mediators, who were traveling in a white Lada sedan designed to carry four passengers plus a driver, former United States Secretary of State Vance took advantage of the former Soviet Fourth Army stationed in the Azeri city of Ganje to enter Nagorno Karabakh inside a BTR--the standard Armored Personnel Carrier used by the Soviet army.

"I saw everything I could possibly see," Vance said as he emerged from the BRT in Agdam late Friday afternoon, describing his five hour trip across the lines to Stepanakert, "I had a thorough briefing. (The Karabakh Armenians) say they want peace like the others do. The seven day cease-fire brokered by the Iranians is a positive step forward."⁷

6) None other than Mr Hakbin, who ICWA readers have met in Tehran during the course of my Itinerant in Iran missives

7) A bizarre aspect of the Vance mission was that upon his arrival in Stepanakert, an Armenian militiaman noticed that one of Vance's shoelaces was untied and dove to the ground to tie it. The moment was captured on camera and played on Azeri television with the sort of commentary one might expect: not only were the Armenians almost licking Vance's boots, but he was letting them. Even more unsavory was the attitude and actions of the French Minister of Humanities, Bernard Kouchner. Almost infamous in Turkey for his emotional connection to the cause of the Kurds,

Vance also described Stepanakert as being in an 'awful' state, with many destroyed buildings and the limited hospital space filled with wounded. He had previously toured a morgue and a hospital in Agdam.

The twin visits of Vance and his UN fact-finding team and the Iranian cease-fire delegation are the most recent would-be peace makers to try and solve the knot of atavistic hatred and mistrust between the two populations of Nagorno Karabakh, a 4,000 square mile mountainous territory inside Azerbaijan but populated mainly by Armenians.

At least 2,000, and perhaps twice that number, of people have been killed in inter-ethnic violence since 1988, when the majority Armenians announced their intention to secede from Azerbaijan and join Armenia. 8)

Violence reached new heights early this year with the withdrawal of soldiers serving in the (former) Soviet army of the Ministry of the Interior (MVD) from the territory.

Both Azerbaijan and Armenia have accused the MVD of passively and actively aiding the other side in the conflict.

But now the two sides are faced only with each other, and however much Baku and Yerevan might or might not agree on any given point, the front is controlled by increasingly independent groups like the Falcons and their Armenian counterparts, the Fedayeen.

Elsewhere in Azerbaijan, the Iranian-brokered cease-fire was reportedly broken in several places well outside of geographic Nagorno Karabakh. At least one violation was apparently confirmed by four Azeri doctors, sent from Baku via helicopter to Kazak, an Azeri town near the Armenian/Georgian frontier. The doctors were being ferried in via helicopter to treat 26 Azeris wounded in an attack from Armenia itself on the Khairli district of Kazak.

No firm death toll resulting from the fighting was available.

Kouchner has now embraced Karabakh as a pet project. We first met in December or January when he was trying to deliver three tons of symbolic aid through to both Shusha and Stepanakert; the former was a pro forma gesture in order to effect the latter. He failed. But on the morning after the Vance visit, Kouchner arrived from Baku after a night-long drive with six tons of aid, determined to do good and let the world know he had. There were a couple of people from Medicines du Monde but the bulk of his retinue were journalists from various French papers, keen on capturing the image and words of the Minister du Humanite during his mission to Stepanakert. As the morning drew on, muttering began in the streets of Agdam: Kouchner had no intention of delivering anything to Shusha. He confirmed this too me, but asked that I 'pass on the word' that all the aid was going to the Azeris. The duplicity and grandstanding was too much: Xojali had fallen a month before and the airport there was open for any amount of aid you could pack into a C-130 (or whatever plane you wanted to bring in). But here was Kouchner, determined to have his picture took with a load of syringes and French mustard. He also thoughtfully left his portable satellite telephone behind... 8) The media continues to use the figure of 1,000 (sometimes 1,500) for the death toll since 1988. My working figure is at least twice that.



Above, Launching GRAD Missiles From A Truck, and
Below, U.N. Envoy Cyrus Vance and T. Goltz in Agdam interview

FEATURE: Flying with the Falcons

Post 19, Outside Agdam--As the fog settles over the old Muslim cemetery outside Agdam, the rattle of small arms and the occasional canon blast echoes through the green rolling hills, and Yagub Mahmedov permits himself a rare smile.

"There never was a real cease-fire and there won't be," says the Commander of the Mudafah Shahinlar, or 'Agdam Defense Falcons', referring to the truce brokered by Iran to separate Azeri and Armenians fighting over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh, "It is a fight to the death and we are prepared to die."

A short man with thick, curly hair and a big salt and pepper beard, the 42 year old Mahmedov has dark staring eyes and a face so far beyond red that it appears purple, as if the demon inside had its hands on his throat. He was once a sculptor and had a family of four. One son was recently killed by Armenian shelling, a fact that seems to have destroyed any lingering, artistic sensibility that he may have once had.

Yagub is mean and bitter man, and so are all the front-line volunteer fighters he leads. Not only are they filled with hatred of the Armenian fedayeen across the lines, but also for the 'sell-outs' back in Baku. There is an almost palpable belief in the equal evil of the enemy without and the enemy within.

"We have war on two fronts," said Yagub during the course of a series of interviews in the knot of unprepossessing buildings that house the arsenal, mess-hall and barracks of the para-military organization that he leads, "and we will win both."

The group, which maintains its independence from the new, national army being formed in Azerbaijan, took the brunt of Armenian defensive fire during the Falcon's free-lance attack on the fortress town of Askeron earlier this month when Mahmedov decided to revenge the fall of the Azeri town of Xojali. Casualty figures range from nine to 50 men.

(The February 25th Armenian attack on Xojali, in addition to resulting in the loss of one of the two, last Azeri positions within Nagorno Karabakh, also led to a purported massacre of up to a thousand fleeing civilians. To date, 192 bodies have been washed in the local Agdam morgue, and survivors say hundreds more remain scattered in the no-man's land between Post 19 and the Armenian positions in Askeron. An additional 284 bodies of other Azeri civilians and soldiers killed in the Agdam area have been processed through the mosque's morgue since January 31st)

The tactical defeat left a bitter taste in the mouths of the Falcons, who felt the national army and the militia of the Popular Front should have backed them up during their assault.

They now insist on institutional independence from the national forces, a policy fraught with future danger.

"When there is a battle the Falcons will fight together with the national army but in times of peace we will remain separate," said Commander Yagub, "You decide what that means."

In concrete terms that means that those now trying to form a disciplined, national army for Azerbaijan under a unitary command are going to have problems when it comes time for the front-line warlords to relinquish their power to a central authority of which they remain instinctively leery.

"The Falcons and the other militia groups were formed at a time when the central government was doing nothing about Karabakh," said a volunteer physician on the staff of the Popular Front forces, now merging with the inchoate national army in Agdam, "It will take time to integrate them, but they will eventually join the army as it forms."

But the militia groups have been the ones who have fought and dragged back the bodies of friends shot and killed in combat, and the emotional experience of feeling deserted by the government over the past four years of conflict is by no means over. The fear in Baku is now that the militia groups create a new Lebanon out of the country, with war-lords competing for chunks of the country against each other.

At present, the Falcons number 600 armed men backed by three t-54 tanks and a number of armored personal carriers--all apparently purchased from departing (former) Soviet units. Uniforms, provisions and other heavy equipment are donated by well-meaning patriots, including the so-called Azeri Mafia.

Other armed groups independent of the government--including a reported 5,000 man army controlled by former Politiburo member Haydar Aliiev in the Azeri territory of Nakhjivan, seem equally determined to keep their powder dry and guns loaded until they determine to their own liking whether the government in Baku suits their own interests or not.

Despite public calls to arms on televisions, supported by nationalistic songs and film clips, the inchoate national army remains tainted by its association with its perceived inactivity in the past and the waffling position of the government over the defense of Nagorno Karabakh--an absolute issue in the hearts and minds of almost all Azeris. The result is that the Falcons are growing due to some ineffable mystique associated with their front-line status, and faster than the national army itself.

After meaty dinner with Commander Yagub and his troops, this correspondent was treated to a training session for operators of a new, double-barreled, heavy caliber anti-aircraft gun that had just been donated by a Baku 'merchant'.

"Thousands are trying to join us," said Mahmedov, "But we only take people with previous military experience and we don't take anyone from a district that borders on Armenia or Karabakh. They should be forming their own militia themselves."

Two young men from the Kazak province near the Georgia frontier were rejected that very morning by a sneering Commander Yagub; a knot of perhaps two dozen men from Agdam waited for interviews outside the gate of the Falcons' HQ, ready to swear an oath to take orders for at least one month--the minimum period of service, after which Falcons can go home on leave for two days.

In addition to local lads^{and} Afghanistan vets, the Falcons have also attracted a curious crowd of out-landers: Pan-Islamic types from Tajikistan to half Azeri/Half Russian workers from Baku, and even people who would not seem to have any motivation in fighting for the Azeri cause save, perhaps that of psycho-killers. Given the fact that no one is paid any salary worth mentioning, it is difficult to describe the foreign component as 'mercenaries,' although no other term quite fits.

"If I killed Armenians at home they would throw me in jail," said Yuri, a baby-faced Falcon from the Ukraine, whom Commander Yagub refers to as his 'lost son'.

Both native and foreign volunteers are now gearing up for the next round of war with the rival Armenian 'Fedayeen' who, reportedly, share much the same volunteer attitude as the Falcons and thus appear equally out of the control of Yerevan as the Falcons and their ilk are out of the direct control of Baku.

Both capitals may make as many cease-fires and agreements as they like, but so long as the militia do not agree to the terms or purpose of the peace, they will fight on.

For their part, the Falcons accept a war of attrition, a war that they might not see won, but that their descendants will.

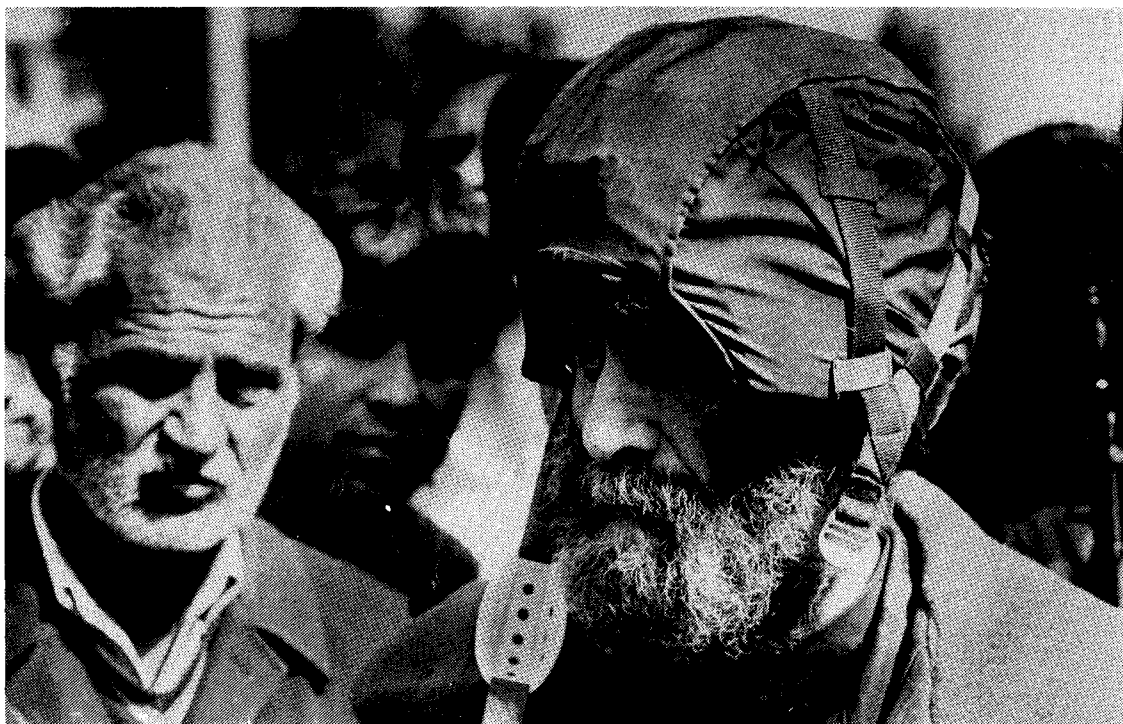
"The population of Azerbaijan is seven million and pushing on eight and the Armenians are only two and a half million," he noted. "They can kill half of us and we still will out number them two to one. You understand? They can't win."

The militant mood of prospective martyrdom has even begun to infect Azeri women, who are now increasingly seen not just in the kitchen but on the forward lines.

"Don't you dare suggest that I cannot do the job you think you can," shouted Nurjahan Husseinova at a newly recruited, male comrade-in-arms at Post 19, "where were you during Tashalti? Where were you during the battle of Askeron? Have you even seen a corpse before or had someone in your sights? You were one of those who returned. That means you are ran away."

The new recruit had suggested that a Muslim woman's honor might be violated if she were to fall into enemy hands, but the 38 year mother's only concern was for her only child.

"The law says that you have to be 20 years of age to join up," she said, putting away her mascara kit inside the pouch that holds her hand grenades, "But my son is only 19 and I don't know if they will take him."



Commander Yagub Mahmedov of the Agdam Defense Falcons