

Nagorny-Karabakh April War

Background:

A second crisis between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh (also known as Nagorny-Karabakh, see case #401) occurred in April 2016. The crisis is informally known as the Four-Day War or the April War. Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan, but the population is 95% ethnically Armenian. The roots of the conflict stem back to the 1920s when Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Lenin assigned the territory to Azerbaijan. Following the end of Soviet rule in 1991, a war of independence was fought between the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR, also referred to as the Republic of Artsakh), backed militarily and economically by the Armenian government, and Azerbaijan. In 1994, a Russian-led mediation effort helped the two sides reach a ceasefire agreement. The NKR failed to achieve its goal of secession; however, it was able to gain de facto control over a significant portion of Azeri territory.

In response to the conflict within Nagorno-Karabakh, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) established the Minsk Group in 1994. The Minsk group is co-chaired by ambassadors from France, Russia, and the United States. Its mandate, established officially in 1995, tasks the group to provide a framework for negotiation and conflict resolution, to obtain an official cessation of conflict, and to promote the peace process. However, the efficacy of the institution came into doubt as little progress had been made in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute.

Since the signing of the 1994 ceasefire, Nagorno-Karabakh's independence had not been recognized; it remained internationally recognized as a part of Azerbaijan. The NKR continued to hold onto the Nagorno-Karabakh region and the territory it gained during the conflict, which accounts for around 14% of Azerbaijan's territory. Armenia continued to provide military and economic support to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Violations of the 1994 ceasefire agreement along the established Line of Control (LoC) between Azeri and Armenian forces occurred regularly – e.g., 25 soldiers were killed in 2010 along the LoC. There was also a significant uptick in the intensity of hostilities between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh in the years leading up to the crisis. In addition to increased tensions between the two sides, Azerbaijan experienced an economic downturn starting in 2014, leading to mass protests in early 2016.

Summary:

The April War began along the Nagorno-Karabakh LoC between Azerbaijan on one side and Armenia and the Armenian-backed Artsakh Defense Army (ADA)– the armed forces of the unrecognized Republic of Artsakh – on the other.

According to Armenia, late on the night of 1 April 2016 and in the early morning of 2 April, Azerbaijani forces launched a missile artillery attack in the Martuni region on the border between Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan. This triggered a crisis for Armenia. Armenia

launched its major response early on 2 April by firing across the border with mortars and high caliber grenade launchers, wounding several civilians. This triggered a crisis for Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's major response began that same day and consisted of further engagement with Armenian forces. Azerbaijan claimed that the ADA and Armenian Armed Forces initiated the hostilities. Most sources, however, indicate that Azerbaijan took the initiative.

Fighting intensified between the two sides on 2 April in and around the towns of Aghdara, Tartar, Agdam, Khojavend, and Fuzuli. The combatants from both sides used heavy weapons in the clashes. Dozens of soldiers from both armies were killed, as were several civilians. According to Russian media, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense reported on 2 April that 12 of its soldiers had been killed. It also claimed to destroy 6 tanks, 15 artillery installations and engineering fortifications of the Armenian Armed Forces, and to kill and wound more than 100 Armenian servicemen. In the evening of 2 April, the presidents of both Armenia and Azerbaijan convened meetings of their respective national security councils.

Russia, which sold weapons to both sides, called for all actors to exercise restraint and for an immediate ceasefire following the outbreak of hostilities. Russia also began a mediation effort between the two sides on 2 April, stepping outside of its role in the OSCE Minsk Group. Russia took the lead in mediating between the crisis actors. Russian ministers and officials remained in constant contact with their counterparts in both Armenia and Azerbaijan throughout the conflict. Russia also brought together Azerbaijan and Armenia's army chiefs in Moscow, for negotiations. Representatives from the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic were not included in negotiations.

The clashes continued for four days until 5 April, when both sides agreed to a Russian brokered ceasefire, terminating the crisis for both sides. The Azerbaijan's defense ministry said in a statement that all military actions stopped as of 12 PM local time (8 AM GMT) the evening on 5 April. At the same time, a resumption of peace talks was announced. Azerbaijan took some territory during the fighting and was satisfied with the outcome of the crisis. Armenia was dissatisfied with the loss of land, despite trying to publicly frame the loss as insignificant.

The OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, the United States, and Russia, played a role as a secondary mediator of the crisis. Russia's role in the OSCE effort was separate from its individual mediation effort during the crisis. The OSCE group met on April 5 and stressed the importance of restoring diplomacy and a sustainable ceasefire. The Minsk Group held a meeting with Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev in Baku where it urged all actors to resolve the conflict. Germany, which held the rotating presidency of the OSCE, met with Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan in Berlin the same day to reinforce negotiations and deescalate tensions. The OSCE Minsk Group continued its mediation effort after the crisis ended, bringing the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan together on 16 May.

The U.S. State Department reported that the total casualty count over the five-day period was approximately 350 soldiers and civilians on both sides. Azerbaijan officials claimed that it regained 2,000 hectares of land. Armenia admitted to losing 800 hectares of land, but it argued

that the territory it lost was not of any tactical or strategic importance and hence that the status quo was maintained.

U.S. and United Nations involvement was limited to condemning the violence and calling for negotiation to end the fighting.

Sources:

Azerbaijan Defense Ministry; Azeri Daily; BBC; Blandy 2008 (Defense Academy of the United Kingdom Advanced Research and Assessment Group, Caucasus Series); Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW); Deutsche Welle (DW); De Waal 2010; German 2012; Guardian; NEWS.am; OSCE; OSCE Minsk Group; PanARMENIAN Network; President of the Republic of Armenia; President of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; TASS; U.N. Secretary General; Uppsala Conflict Data Program; U.S. Department of State; Welton and Barrowman 2016 (EU ISSICEU (Intra- and Intersocietal Sources of Instability in the Caucasus and EU Opportunities to Respond) Project)