

EXTERNAL

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@Vilk Ilch Oganesev and Artavaz Aramovich Mirzoyan
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£Azerbaijdzhani Republic

Vilk Ilch Oganesev and Artavaz Aramovich Mirzoyan, ethnic Armenian citizens of the Republic of Georgia, were arrested on 28 April 1992 at the airport of Baku, the capital of the Azerbaijdzhani Republic, when they arrived there in transit to the Georgian capital of Tbilisi via Samara and Volgograd in the Russian Republic. According to unofficial sources, as of October 1992 they still had not been charged with any criminal offence. It is further alleged that their lawyer was told by Azerbaijdzhani officials that the two men were being held solely on grounds of their ethnic origin as hostages, in the hope that they could be exchanged for ethnic Azerbaijdzhanis held by Armenians in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Amnesty International is concerned by reports that Vilk Oganesev and Artavaz Mirzoyan are being held without charge solely because of their ethnic origin, and is seeking further information on the case from the Azerbaijdzhani authorities. If these reports are confirmed the organization will regard the two men as prisoners of conscience, who should be released immediately and unconditionally.

Background information

Relations between the republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia have been increasingly tense since 1988 when issues surrounding the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh came to the fore. Nagorno-Karabakh is an area of Azerbaijan separated from Armenia to the west by a six-mile land strip, and inhabited mainly by ethnic Armenians who have been pressing for greater autonomy. On 6 January 1992 the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic declared independence from Azerbaijan, but has not received international recognition.

Communal violence, including hostage-taking, broke out between the Armenian and Azerbaijdzhani populations of the region following demonstrations at the beginning of 1988 calling for the area to be incorporated into Armenia. Such calls by ethnic Armenians in Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, were echoed at mass demonstrations in the Armenian capital of Yerevan, but the demands were rejected by both the Azerbaijdzhani and USSR parliaments later that year.

The conflict escalated, as communal violence continued along with clashes between residents and Soviet forces. USSR troops were withdrawn after the breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991, leaving ethnic Armenian paramilitary units in direct conflict with Azerbaijdzhani forces. Fighting continues in spite of a ceasefire agreed by the Armenian and Azerbaijdzhani Defence Ministers in September this year.

Refugees, both from Nagorno-Karabakh itself and those who fled from one republic to the other, are said to number hundreds of thousands. Casualty reports vary, with one estimate placing the death toll at over 2,000 since the trouble began. Reports of atrocities have been made against all parties to the conflict, with hundreds of non-combatant civilians said to have been deliberately and arbitrarily killed.

Hostage-taking continues, with individuals often said to be held by private families seeking an exchange for one of their

members held by the other side. According to one unofficial source the situation of Vilik Oganosov and Artavaz Mirzoyan is complicated by the fact that they have no ethnic Armenian relatives in Nagorno-Karabakh with whom such an arrangement could be made.

Amnesty International has continued to urge all parties to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh to ensure that no non-combatants are detained as hostages, or otherwise held solely on the grounds of their ethnic origin. The organization has also appealed to all sides to protect non-combatants from all acts of reprisal and violence and to treat prisoners in their custody humanely. It has called for all alleged abuses within its mandate to be investigated fully and impartially, with the results made public and the perpetrators brought to justice.