

## More Armenian-Azerbaijani border incidents may follow

Monday, January 27 2014

The military situation in Tavush is now calm, it was reported yesterday. A 16-year-old girl was wounded in Azerbaijani attacks on villages in the northern Tavush region on January 23. Along with a more serious incident on January 19, the attacks occurred just before the meeting in Paris of the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers under the auspices of the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Although the meeting took place as scheduled, little of substance emerged from it, and hopes of a diplomatic breakthrough on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue have been dashed.

### What next

As the incursion on January 19 suggests a new-found improvement in Azerbaijan's operational capacity, a new wave of probes of Armenian defences may be expected. That may trigger a more assertive Armenian posture, resulting in an escalating cycle of heightened tension and ceasefire violations by both sides. Yet it was the timing that will raise fresh concerns for the future of the peace process.

### Analysis

In the wake of a better-than-expected summit between the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents, and just days before the two countries' foreign ministers were set to meet, hopes for progress over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have been dashed, after Azerbaijan launched a military incursion on January 19. Although the military situation has long been tense, with monthly violations of the ceasefire, this recent attack was different from past incidents, for three reasons:

- The incursion by an Azerbaijani reconnaissance unit of about 30 men on January 19 was a successful probe of Armenian defensive positions along the Karabakh border, and consisted of two separate diversionary attacks, suggesting a higher degree of operational capability than before, better coordination and an improvement in the Azerbaijani military's ability to manoeuvre tactically.
- The incursion was followed by a sudden flare-up in ceasefire violations elsewhere, as other units sought to provoke an Armenian response prior to the diplomatic summit.
- Although the pattern of coordination with the diplomatic calendar is familiar, the incursion may be a new demonstration of offensive prowess by Azerbaijan's new defence minister (see AZERBAIJAN: Minister's exit suggests defence re-set - October 28, 2013).

The escalation of military hostilities is being driven by two factors, both of which suggest that attacks will increase in intensity and duration:

- The first factor stems from pronounced Azerbaijani frustration over the lack of any real progress from the Karabakh peace process.
- The second factor is rooted in the 20th anniversary this year of the Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement, adding political pressure on the Azerbaijani leadership to put on a more robust show of force in the face of lack of progress towards a permanent settlement.

### Impact

- The Azerbaijani attack will reduce any expectations of diplomatic progress, while magnifying the fragility of the ceasefire.
- As the Armenian side follows a policy response defined as using 'overwhelming force', the risk of a renewed cycle of violence will increase.
- The incident will also test Western resolve and Russian responses, as Azerbaijan remains sceptical of the peace process.
- The January 19 attacks will challenge the credibility and relevance of OSCE mediators.

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[Attacks may now escalate](#)

## Recent optimism

For much of the past month, there has been unusual optimism for a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, after a flurry of diplomatic activity and positive statements in the wake of a meeting between the Armenian and the Azerbaijani presidents in Vienna on November 19. That meeting, brokered by mediators from OSCE's Minsk Group, was unusually positive, as the two leaders met alone for 90 minutes before openly heralding a new atmosphere of positive dialogue on a broad range of sensitive issues. Moreover, the two presidents then gave their foreign ministers specific instructions to prepare a set of new proposals for a follow-up meeting (see CAUCASUS: Karabakh diplomacy makes promising new start - January 7, 2014).

Yet, that optimism now seems premature after the January 19 attacks by Azerbaijan undermined the foreign ministers' meeting in Paris on January 24. The incident targeted one of the more lightly guarded sections of the Nagorno-Karabakh border, before it was repulsed. An Armenian sergeant was killed.

The attack was not an isolated incident, as shooting on January 23 resulted in two civilians being wounded -- a 16-year-old Armenian girl in a village in Armenia's north-eastern Tavush province and a 37-year-old female resident of a village on the Azerbaijani side of the border in the same region.

## Paris meeting

According to the OSCE press release, the Paris meeting discussed substantive issues to advance the peace process. However, Armenian Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandian complained about cease-fire violations and Azerbaijani threats to resolve the issue by force. The Minsk Group's three French, Russian and US co-chairs expressed their deep concern that recent incidents were undermining the negotiations. The Armenian Foreign Ministry later accused the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry of distorting the meeting, by suggesting that its focus had been on the restoration of Azerbaijani territorial integrity.

The co-chairs said they planned to travel to the region in the coming weeks to continue talks with the Azerbaijani and Armenian presidents. There had been hopes for a summit in February, but this now looks less likely.

## Restraint or retaliation?

For its part, the Armenian side has sought to avoid being drawn into a cycle of violence. Describing the attacks as a "provocation", Armenian Defence Minister Seyran Ohanyan reported to a cabinet session on January 23 that, although tension remained high, his troops had been careful to not over-react, with orders to respond "only to aimed gunfire". However, such restraint may prove temporary as the Armenian side has also adopted a posture of deterrence, driven by a policy to respond to Azerbaijani attacks with overwhelming force, thereby raising the spectre of escalating tension.

That policy was reiterated on January 24, when Ohanyan hinted that Armenia might be acquiring a Russian state-of-the-art ballistic-missile system. The Iskander-M system, capable of striking targets more than 400 kilometres (km) away, would pose a specific challenge, directly affecting the region's already delicate balance of power (see CAUCASUS: Tensions will stay high until Baku election - August 26, 2013). Ohanyan referred to completing the acquisition of long-range, precision-guided weapons, as part of Armenia's membership of the Russian-led military Collective Security Treaty Organisation. For his part, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan had said in late December that Armenia would in the next year or two boost its military strength with new and powerful weapons that many other countries did not have.

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Meeting condemns ceasefire violations

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Armenia may acquire missiles capable of hitting Baku

The Armenian armed forces are currently equipped with much older, less-advanced Scud-B and Tochka-U ballistic missiles, with a range of 300 km and 120 km respectively. Armenia is also reportedly seeking to acquire Chinese multiple-launch rocket systems.

Maintaining a stance of restraint in the face of increasing attacks and expanded ceasefire violations may well challenge and test the training, professionalism and hitherto defensive posture of the Armenian armed forces.