

Armenian murders show unequal relations with Russia

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The Russian soldier accused of slaying the Avetisyan family in January will be tried at the Russian military base in Armenia, a visiting Russian parliamentarian said on March 28. This would fail to meet Armenian demands that murders committed on its territory, by a soldier who had gone off base, be tried in an Armenian court. The tragedy sparked a new debate on Armenian-Russian relations, but Russia's handling of the incident and Armenia's inept response indicate Yerevan's weakness vis-a-vis its ally Moscow.



A memorial ceremony for the Avetisyan family in Yerevan (Reuters/Hrant Khachatryan//PAN Photo)

What next

The killings in Gyumri, Armenia's second-largest city, shocked the nation. Spontaneous demonstrations there and in Yerevan demanded that the Russian perpetrator be turned over to Armenian authorities. Reports that he will not keep the issue alive in the public consciousness. Any concession in a complicated legal procedure and disputed legal jurisdiction will be unacceptable to Armenian public opinion. However, Armenia's long-standing security reliance on Russia makes it unlikely that Yerevan will fight for Armenian interests in this or other matters, such as Moscow's plan for a common Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) currency.

Analysis

Early on January 12, Valeri Permyakov, a Russian army conscript with a reported history of indiscipline, deserted his post at the 102nd Russian military base in Gyumri. Armed with an AK-47, extra ammunition and a bayonet, the soldier entered the city and randomly targeted a private residence.

After breaking in, he went from room to room, shooting the occupants. In a few minutes, most of the Avetisyan family was dead, including the parents, their son, daughter-in-law and a two-year old granddaughter, and an unmarried daughter.

The couple's other grandchild, a six-month-old boy, was repeatedly stabbed. He survived the attack but succumbed to his wounds on January 19, taking the death toll to seven.

Suspicions aroused

The Russian then changed into civilian clothes, leaving his uniform and boots in the house, and reportedly headed on foot to the Armenian border with Turkey. Long closed, the border is policed by Russian border guards; it is a heavily militarised and well-guarded zone forbidden to civilians. This and other aspects of the killings fuelled suspicions about the soldier's motives and actions.

By midnight the same day, Russian border guards had apprehended Permyakov. However, Armenian police chief Vladimir Gasparyan said on January 19 that his force had tracked the soldier and knew 3-4 hours in advance of his capture that he was in the border area. Gasparyan's statement was in response to public criticism of the police, but it raised suspicions that Armenian authorities had preferred that Russian forces capture their own man to a publicly embarrassing handover of the suspect.

Impact

- | The response of authorities in Yerevan and Moscow to the incident and its aftermath will continue to be limited and tardy.
- | Yerevan's inept handling of the case will confirm Armenia's pronounced erosion of sovereignty in return for Russian 'protection'.
- | The inherent asymmetry in relations between Armenia and Russia will grow as Yerevan is drawn deeper into the Moscow-led EEU.

Russian conscript based at Gyumri reportedly confessed to random act of murder of Armenian family

Once the news of the capture broke, including reports by Russian military officers that Permyakov had confessed under interrogation at the base where he remains detained, local Armenians began demanding that the soldier be turned over to Armenian authorities.

Legal wrangling, public pressure

Public demands for justice mounted over the following days, bolstered by doubts that Russian military officials would ensure a fair trial and suspicions that the Russian soldier would quickly be sent back to Russia. The absence of senior Armenian official statements, visits or actions only inflamed popular outrage over the senseless murders and directed public anger against the Armenian government.

Such a policy of state neglect shone a more intense spotlight on local officials. In response, Armenian Prosecutor-General Gevorg Kostanyan was dispatched to Gyumri.

The prosecutor-general, having no legal experience in the delicate issue of crimes involving Russian military personnel, quickly escalated tensions. First, he refused to make any public statements, and then, in the face of an intense public outcry, offered ambitious but legally unfounded promises that the suspect would be turned over to the Armenian justice system.

Armenian prosecutor-general
bungles case

Angry demonstrations

Protests by several thousand demonstrators followed in Gyumri and by a smaller number at rallies in Yerevan. In both cities, demonstrators demanded that the Russian soldier be immediately transferred to Armenian custody to stand trial in Armenia under Armenian law.

On January 14-15, there were demonstrations outside the Russian military base and at the consulate in Gyumri, where several thousand demonstrators tried to force their way through a protective cordon of Armenian police. With tensions rising, the funeral of six members of the Avetisyan family on January 15 sparked a more violent protest. A large number of youngsters clashed with police, with stones thrown.

This triggered a heavy police response in both Gyumri and Yerevan, including the arrest of more than 30 demonstrators, many of whom were publicly beaten while in detention. More than a dozen were taken to hospital.

Broader context

The fact that the murders quickly aroused discontent and mass protests demonstrates the public's level of frustration. The legal process has gone relatively quiet.

Many Armenians are
frustrated with their inferior
position towards Russia

However, Russia continues to be perceived as a source of security in the region, particularly given the volatile ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. As a result, the current regime in Armenia, which needs to look to its own security (see ARMENIA: Constitutional reform will be dividing line - March 18, 2015) and to ensure its continued support from Russia, appears to lack any room for manoeuvre in its relations with its 'strategic partner'. Many Armenians are angered that Russia continues to sell arms to Azerbaijan, sales that Yerevan is powerless to stop.

All such crises demonstrate the increasingly weak Armenian position towards Russia, economically as well as strategically. Its acceptance of EEU membership -- Armenia joined on January 2 -- instead of an association agreement with the EU is one example (see ARMENIA/GEORGIA: Trade will push Yerevan into Eurasia - July 15, 2014). Another is talk about a common currency, on which Armenia is being allowed no say. With the current regime in Yerevan, Armenia would have to accept such a development; by contrast, Kazakhstan last year strongly rejected the idea of a common currency.