

Azerbaijan Warns of “Great War” in South Caucasus

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Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

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BAKU – Azerbaijan warned on Thursday the risk of conflict over the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh was rising and that a “great war” in the South Caucasus was inevitable if Armenian forces do not withdraw.

Ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, backed by Christian Armenia, threw off rule by Muslim Azerbaijan in fighting that broke out as the Soviet Union headed towards its 1991 collapse.

An estimated 30,000 people died before a ceasefire was agreed in 1994, but the threat of fresh conflict is never far away in the strategic South Caucasus, a region criss-crossed by pipelines taking oil and gas to the West.

“Diplomats could not achieve concrete results for 15 years, and Azerbaijan cannot wait another 15 years,” an Azeri Defence Ministry statement cited Minister Safar Abiyev as telling France’s ambassador in Baku, Gabriel Keller.

“Now it is up to the military, and this danger is gradually approaching. If the Armenian occupier does not liberate our lands, the start of a great war in the South Caucasus is inevitable.”

Oil-producing Azerbaijan frequently makes threats to take Nagorno-Karabakh back by force, but tensions have increased in the past year over moves by Armenia and Azeri ally Turkey to open their border, which Ankara closed in 1993 in solidarity with Azerbaijan.

A trio of mediators from the United States, France and Russia say they are making progress in talks between the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia, but diplomats say neither side appears ready to commit to painful concessions in order to seal a peace accord.

Forces on the frontline frequently trade fire, and last week Azerbaijan said three of its soldiers had been shot dead by Armenian snipers. The Nagorno-Karabakh authorities denied any clashes had taken place.

Faced with a backlash from Azerbaijan — a key potential supplier for Europe’s planned Nabucco gas pipeline — Turkey has backed away from opening its border with Armenia since signing accords in October last year, saying Armenian forces should first pull back from lands captured during the war.

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