

Shooting Again

Unsuccessful Assassination Attempt Shakes Up Karabakh and Armenia

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

Less than six months after the assassination of eight top Armenian officials, the president of Karabakh narrowly escaped an attack on his life.

On March 22, several gunmen armed with automatic weapons, opened fire on President Arkady Ghukasian's car in Stepanakert as he was going home from his office shortly after midnight. Ghukasian was heavily wounded in the legs. The following day he was transferred to a Yerevan hospital for surgery. His two bodyguards were seriously injured and remained in critical condition.

The attack took place near the presidential palace. After the first shots were fired, the driver lost control of the car and slammed into a tree. One of the president's guards returned fire with a hand pistol. The attackers escaped, leaving behind 57 rifle cartridges and a walkie-talkie.

Twenty-eight people were almost immediately arrested on suspicion of complicity, including former Defense Minister Samvel Babayan and his brother, Karen, Mayor of Stepanakert. Fifteen of the detainees were released within a week.

Karabakh's Prosecutor General said Samvel Babayan would be charged in connection with the attack, adding that the Babayan brothers were already under investigation for other offenses, including "abuse of office, forgery and tax evasion." The struggle for power between the Babayans and Ghukasian had been played out in various forms for more than a year. Most recently, Samvel Babayan had been sacked as commander of the Karabakh army. Immediately prior to that, he had physically assaulted Prime Minister Anushavan Danielian on a Karabakh street.

Those who are considered in the "anti-Ghukasian" camp had stated their intention to gain a majority in the upcoming parliamentary elections to be held in Karabakh in June. In this way, they expected to be able to influence the socio-economic and political developments in the country, and gradually regain control of government levers. The



detention of Babayan arrested the opposition's efforts. Thus, some political figures in Karabakh and in Armenia criticized Babayan's arrest by Karabakh authorities, as being politically motivated.

However, the overwhelming majority of politicians and government officials strongly condemned the attack on Ghukasian. The official Stepanakert statement called the assassination attempt "a criminal assault against" Karabakh's statehood. It blamed the attack on those who wanted to block political reform in Karabakh, as well as the formation of "a healthy moral and psychological atmosphere in the republic."

President Robert Kocharian of Armenia issued a statement of condemnation. The attempt on the life of President Ghukasian "is a challenge to the people of Nagorno Karabakh, who have already demonstrated their determination to become the masters of

their destiny in difficult times," said Kocharian. "I strongly condemn this terrorist attack and express my unconditional support to the President of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic, the government and their policies."

The people, too, were shocked by the effort to destabilize their government. Most saw it as an extension of the military commanders' efforts to extend their control. Thus, the widespread searches and arrests were understood and tolerated in that light.

However, the arrest of journalist Vahram Aghajanian, a correspondent for the Stepanakert-based, Babayan-supported newspaper *Tasnerord Nahang*, fueled anger in Armenia and abroad. Aghajanian was arrested for "violating the martial law regime" by publishing critical articles on Karabakh's current leadership and sentenced to one year in prison. Specifically, he had reported villagers' displeasure with Prime Minister Danielian for



not addressing their grievances.

This is not the first time Aghajanian or *Tasnerord Nahang* have been the target of lawsuits. Aghajanian was arrested for a short time several years ago, again for violating the martial law regime. The newspaper was sued just a few months ago for libeling the Prime Minister.

The search, seizure and imprisonment of a journalist provoked widespread protest. Journalists in Azerbaijan even used the arrest to call for "press freedoms" in Karabakh and appealed for his release.

Baku had earlier offered some words of consolation and advice following the assassination attempt, as well. Azerbaijani President Haidar Aliyev said he is "convinced" that there was no connection between the assassination

attempt and the ongoing Armenian-Azerbaijani talks on the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. "We're interested in a stable situation in Armenia so as to continue the negotiations and resolve the conflict peacefully," said Aliyev at Baku airport on his way to Georgia for a two-day visit, immediately preceding a similar visit by the Armenian president.

"It is their internal affair," added Aliyev. "We should not interfere in this process and use this situation to our advantage. Armenia must solve its own problems." For this comment, he was criticized by opposition parties in Azerbaijan. Characterizing the incident as "Armenia's internal affair" implies recognition of Karabakh's independence, they said.

However, reiterating official Baku's policy of non-recognition of Karabakh's Armenian leadership, Foreign Minister Vilayat Guliyev was quick to add that the incident would not stop the negotiation process. He said Ghukasian "has not played and does not play a special role in the talks" which are taking

place, with Karabakh's knowledge, but with the direct participation of the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents.

There is no date for the trial for those detained, just as there isn't one in Armenia for those apprehended following the October 27 shootings. However, in Yerevan, several of those arrested have been released, due to insufficient evidence. Kocharian's former Chief of Staff, Alexander Harutunian is among them. ■



From top left clockwise: President Ghukasian and Prime Minister Daniellian; Ghukasian's bullet-proof Mercedes after the shooting, as shown on the daily Armenian evening news program, *Hailur*; Journalist Vahram Aghajanian, detained soon after the shooting.