

Azeri president addresses parliament on Karabakh 23 February - full version

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Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev told parliament during the debate on the OSCE Minsk Group's proposals for Nagorny Karabakh that he had decided to make the three peace proposals public in order to hear suggestions on how the conflict should be solved. He presented a history of the conflict and peace efforts to solve it. Aliyev chided the opposition for insisting on the war option, saying that even though Azerbaijan had an army capable of waging war, too much blood would be spilled in such an action. Following is the full text of Aliyev's speech in the country's parliament, broadcast by Azerbaijani State TV on 23 February:

[Subhead] Wishes parliament success in work

Esteemed Milli Maclis. Dear deputies, ladies and gentlemen. I am cordially greeting you, the Azerbaijani Milli Maclis, the newly-elected Milli Maclis, and wish you success in the next five years of your activities. [applause]

This is the second elected Milli Maclis after Azerbaijan gained its independence. The Milli Maclis elected in 1995 did a lot to strengthen Azerbaijan's sovereignty, to develop a legal, democratic and secular state and to carry out social, economic, legal and political reforms. The main result of this work were adopted laws. I can say with full responsibility that over the past five years the Azerbaijani Milli Maclis worked very effectively and adopted very important and complicated laws. These laws played a pivotal role in developing an independent state in Azerbaijan, in carrying out economic reforms and in ensuring the rule of law. At the same time, the Milli Maclis contributed to Azerbaijan's foreign policy with interparliamentary ties and other means. Therefore, we should properly value the work of the Milli Maclis, the former Milli Maclis that was elected under the first Azerbaijani Constitution after we had gained state sovereignty.

I believe that the second Milli Maclis is more effective because of its composition, its level. I am fully confident that the Milli Maclis, which has just started its work, will be even more successful and will effectively use the previous experience. So, it will fulfil its tasks of supreme legislative body to further strengthen Azerbaijan's state sovereignty and carry out tasks of the sovereign state. In this my first meeting with you, I would like to congratulate you on having been elected to the Milli Maclis and again wish success to the new Milli Maclis. [applause]

[Subhead] Karabakh is Azerbaijan's greatest problem

The issue on the agenda today should not only be discussed. The issue has been put on the Milli Maclis agenda on my initiative. A question arises: why has this issue not been discussed by the Milli Maclis before today, and why is it on the Milli Maclis agenda now? I will explain.

First, because suggestions and demands were voiced on many occasions over recent years at the Milli Maclis, especially by the opposition camp, that the settlement of Azerbaijan's, our independent state's, most difficult, most complicated and greatest problem hindering our development - the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict - the liberation of Azerbaijan's occupied lands and the return of people displaced from their native lands, be discussed in the Milli Maclis. Some people even suggested that a commission be set up in the Milli Maclis to that end. But I, as Azerbaijani president, did not think these suggestions expedient. Therefore, I tried over the past years to fulfil my task, of course, not on my own, but jointly with all the government bodies, appropriate executive bodies and the Milli Maclis leadership.

Foreign Minister Vilayat Quliyev has informed us about the major issues over those years. This issue will be discussed at the Milli Maclis in order to allow you to participate in its discussion, or to be more precise, to allow you to assess the current situation properly and to unite your efforts, not only yours, but of the entire Azerbaijani people, all of Azerbaijan's political forces, including opposition forces. Not only at the Milli Maclis, we decided to record the whole course of the session and to broadcast it on TV so that the Azerbaijani people, citizens will be better informed about this issue.

[Subhead] Brief history of Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict

My aim is to inform both you and the Azerbaijani people about what has been done to solve the problem so far, what has been achieved and, what is more important, what should be done. This conflict has a long history. For the first time, the Armenians, I mean the Armenians of Armenia and Nagornyy Karabakh, launched a very serious and severe campaign in 1988 to separate Nagornyy Karabakh from Azerbaijan and annex it to Armenia, and we can say that they succeeded in this.

The word miatsum [unity in Armenian] has now been forgotten. This is an Armenian word. But at that time, every Armenian of Armenia, every Armenian of Nagornyy Karabakh or every Armenian in the world repeated this word several times a day.

As I have been familiar with these issues for a long time and was closely dealing with the problems of the Nagornyy Karabakh Autonomous Region during the period when I directly headed Azerbaijan, I have a better insight into the history and difficulties of this problem. These land claims by the Armenians are nothing new. You know that in the past, when both Azerbaijan and Armenia, the Caucasus as a whole, were a part of Russia, there were no republics or borders between republics.

After Tzarist Russia conquered northern Azerbaijan as a result of the 1804-1813 and 1826-1828 wars, it gradually strengthened its rule here and implemented its ruling methods. I mean it implemented the ruling methods used by the Romanov dynasty for years, and this part of Russia was divided into guberniyas and uyezds [territorial divisions]. Representatives of the Tzarist government ruled the guberniyas, uyezds and all government bodies. I mean there were no boundaries. Everyone lived there where they lived.

But at the same time, we have our history. We know which territory Azerbaijan covered. We know this well. We all know this and say with a pain in the heart, remembering our history, that Azerbaijan's territory was much bigger than it is now. But at different stages of history some parts of this territory were given to the Armenians - once, twice, three times.

A democratic republic was established in Azerbaijan for the first time in 1918. A war was going on in Nagornyy Karabakh when the republic was formed as well. But the democratic republic collapsed quickly and the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic was established. The USSR was created in 1922. Azerbaijan was one of the founders of the USSR. Borders were defined at that time. If we remember the past today, we can state with full truthfulness that Azerbaijan was encroached upon during those years as well, a part of Azerbaijan's lands were given to Armenia, the boundaries were not marked correctly. The Nagornyy Karabakh Autonomous Region was created in 1923. Its history is also known. The Armenians believe that Armenians were treated unjustly here at that time. But we believed and we still believe that

Azerbaijan was encroached upon. Because establishing an autonomous region in Nagornyy Karabakh because a part of its population was Armenians meant granting autonomy to an area inside Azerbaijan and granting it rights on the basis of the principles of autonomy.

After this, Armenia, and by this I mean mainly nationalist circles in Armenia, the intelligentsia, not all, but zealous nationalists, the Dashnaktsutyun Party - which, as you know, appeared at the end of the last century [19th century] and has been operating in different countries - all these forces raised from time to time the issue of separating Karabakh and annexing it to Armenia whereas there was the USSR.

[Subhead] Denies he treated Karabakh badly in Soviet times

I have said that I am well aware of this because of my previous work. They raised this issue in the 1950s and 1960s as well. I was working at that time in such a sphere that I am well aware of this. Finally, I headed Azerbaijan since 1969. This issue was raised at that time as well. A commission was set up in 1977 to prepare the USSR constitution. The commission was headed by the then secretary-general of the Communist Party [Leonid] Brezhnev, and representatives of the republics, including me, were members of it. Too many suggestions were made while the commission was drawing up the draft constitution, approximately over a year, that Nagornyy Karabakh be annexed to Armenia. There were even several attempts at discussing this at the commission.

You should understand me correctly, I am talking about what happened. I prevented this at that time. But it was difficult to do so. But I did this. I prevented it by my will, by defending the national interests of the Azerbaijani people with my body and soul. But at the same time they always strained the situation in Nagornyy Karabakh. Therefore, when I headed Azerbaijan - I should say this frankly - we were creating mainly favourable economic conditions for Nagornyy Karabakh, we gave priority to its economic development. Because the question was always raised that Nagornyy Karabakh was discriminated against in Azerbaijan and that Armenians could not develop in Nagornyy Karabakh. I repeat: at that time, we gave more attention to Nagornyy Karabakh in order to preserve Azerbaijan's integrity, to protect the integrity of its territories. True, later some dilettantes accused me of doing this. I repeat today that I did this. I did this because, first, it was necessary to settle Azerbaijanis in Nagornyy Karabakh; second, to prevent Nagornyy Karabakh and the Armenians from raising this issue.

Then, the issue became other way round. After this conflict started, the USSR press again accused me of allegedly discriminating against Armenians while being in power in Azerbaijan, of changing the demographic situation there [in Nagornyy Karabakh], of taking certain measures to expel Armenians from there, and as a result, the number of Armenians in Nagornyy Karabakh had decreased.

Their number decreased in Nagornyy Karabakh as well as in other Azerbaijani districts. Armenians were saying this. When this issue was being discussed at the USSR Supreme Soviet at that time, their representatives, even the president of the Armenian Academy of Sciences, Ambartsumyan, - we had elected him honorary member of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences some time ago, besides, he had also been elected a member of the Georgian Academy of Sciences with the aim of strengthening friendship - mentioned my name. I still remember those words: Heydar Aliyev has persistently cleansed Nagornyy Karabakh and Azerbaijan of Armenians. This did not surprise me, but what surprised me was that at that time many people in Azerbaijan again accused Aliyev and agreed with those words: right, Heydar Aliyev is treating Nagornyy Karabakh badly. That is why today Armenians want to annex Nagornyy Karabakh

to Armenia.

I am telling you this because I want you to know that this is not a new problem. Armenia was working on this. One should also bear in mind that 25 days after I had been left out of all activities in Moscow, this process speeded up. A month later all Armenians in Nagornyy Karabakh rose and decided to annex Nagornyy Karabakh to Armenia. Then, those tragedies started, their results are evident.

I think today that we have not gathered here to find the guilty person, to say who is to blame, who is not and why the territories were occupied. I would like to ask you set these issues aside. But I would like to express my position on one matter.

Why did this happen? Not because the Azerbaijani people are weaker than Armenians. No. Our centuries-old history demonstrates the strength of the Azerbaijani people. First, because Armenians and Armenia had been preparing for this for a long time. But people in Azerbaijan had forgotten about this. They had forgotten those years. Second, when the conflict started, I mean when Armenia made the territorial claims, all Armenians - both in Armenia and all over the world - set aside all internal disagreements and relations and united. They all united around the idea of miatsum, consolidated their force and gained what we are witnessing now. In contrast to them, when these events started in Azerbaijan, our people could not unite, leaders were wavering and the Nagornyy Karabakh issue was forgotten in a year or two. Internal disputes, clashes, a struggle for power started in Azerbaijan. Therefore, in such a situation the Armenians could easily occupy Azerbaijani lands.

I am repeating and asking you to set aside these issues during the discussion. This will be done later if necessary. I came here today and made an appeal, an initiative with the Milli Maclis with the aim of informing the Milli Maclis, the public and the people about the existing situation. But Not only to inform them. Let us all think in this difficult situation, and not only think, but cooperate in order to find a way out of the situation. I am asking the people who are to deliver speeches here not to touch upon history or accuse someone and say that someone is to blame or is not to blame. We do not need all this. What we need is to know how to achieve our task.

[Subhead] Cease-fire signed in 1994

What have we done until now? The foreign minister has spoken about this. I will also say a few words. What should we do in the current situation? Because 20 per cent of Azerbaijani lands were occupied - first Nagornyy Karabakh, and then seven district around Nagornyy Karabakh. We have 1m refugees from the occupied lands, including those expelled from Armenia. People expelled from occupied territories have been living in especially tough conditions in tents not for one or two years, but for seven or eight years.

We achieved a cease-fire in 1994. Some people have been expressing different ideas on this. I am again stating today that the cease-fire achieved in May 1994 was a very important measure and we did this with full conscience. The past period shows - although the problem has not been solved yet - that this measure was necessary. Unfortunately, many have forgotten the war, they are living quietly and comfortably. Unfortunately, they have forgotten the war. People are living quietly, our economy is developing, foreign investments are flowing to the country, the process of state-building is under way, our independence is strengthening, Azerbaijan is following a resolute foreign policy. All this would not have been possible if there had been a war.

[Subhead] Russians, OSCE Minsk Group try to broker peace

When we stopped fighting we hoped that we would be able to reach a peaceful solution to the problem during the cease-fire. But many people might not know this. We avoided a mistake at that time. Russia was the major mediator, although there was the Minsk Group as well. But Russia took the initiative. A cease-fire agreement was signed and immediately after this the Russian defence minister asked the Armenian and Azerbaijani defence ministers to come to Moscow and consult how to liberate the lands now. We believed him. We sent our defence minister there. At that time a certain Mammadov was the defence minister. Unfortunately, some defence ministers who held office at that time were not worthy people. But what happened the next day? Then the Minsk Group did not have cochairmen, but a chairman. The Swede Jan Eliasson was the chairman. He visited Armenia and then Azerbaijan. He also participated in achieving the cease-fire. I held negotiations with him. Suddenly I was informed that Moscow TV was showing [former Russian Defence Minister Pavel] Grachev holding an extended session and suggesting what should be done in Azerbaijan. I immediately got worried. I contacted our defence minister in Moscow. What was the matter? It emerged that talks were being held there with [former Azeri Speaker] Rasul Quliyev's consent and in the presence of our ambassador in Moscow on sending Russian peacekeeping troops to the region to ensure the cease-fire. Is [former Azeri Foreign Minister] Hasan Hasanov here?

[Hasan Hasanov, standing up] Yes, Mr President.

[Heydar Aliyev] Do you remember?

[Hasan Hasanov] Yes, I remember quite well.

[Heydar Aliyev] From the night till the morning, for how long did we...?

[Hasan Hasanov] We found him at 0700.

[Heydar Aliyev] I made him get on a plane urgently and return. Do you remember?

[Hasan Hasanov] He was hiding for some time. We could not even find him for two hours, he came late.

[Heydar Aliyev] Right. He was hiding, he betrayed us. [addressing Hasanov] Sit down. But this did not end with this.

Three days later, a large number of Russian Defence Ministry generals came to Azerbaijan with plans about what they would deploy where and what they would do to help us so that the Armenian armed forces could leave. I listened to them and said thank you for your initiative. But we do not need that. They tried hard, maybe we should go and you look at it again. I said no. I am asking you to turn back and go home. We avoided this danger at that time.

But the positive aspect should be pointed out that without any separating force, we have managed to preserve the cease-fire between Armenia and Azerbaijan for more than six years. This is not only our merit, and we should probably admit that the Armenian side, too, had a positive attitude to this, the preservation of the cease-fire. I am saying again that the negotiations after that have not yielded the desired result. But I want to say a few words about the process of the peace negotiations to give you a wider picture.

The OSCE Minsk Group was set up in 1992 and the United Nations placed this issue under the OSCE's jurisdiction. The OSCE set up the Minsk Group and the Minsk conference. The Minsk Group includes 12 states. But the Minsk Group

has had chairmen. For example, when I started working here in 1993, Italy and Italian Deputy Foreign Minister [Undersecretary at the Italian Foreign Ministry Mario] Raffaelli was the chairman. After him, in 1994, Sweden and Swedish Foreign Minister Jan Eliasson became the chairman. After 1994 we changed the situation. But at this time, simultaneously with the war, a representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry and well-known person Kazimiro, engaged in this work to solve the problem. He would visit the region once a month. He would invite our representatives to Moscow. At that time, Tofiq Zulfugarov was the deputy foreign minister and an expert on this issue. He went there and participated in the negotiations. From Nagornyy Karabakh they brought their "foreign minister" [Arkadiy] Gukasyan. And we sent [Nizami] Bahmanov, head of Nagornyy Karabakh's Azerbaijani community. The work went on in parallel. But when I saw it, the Minsk Group was chaired by Italy and then Sweden. Finally, we changed the situation at the OSCE Budapest summit in 1994. That is to say, we turned it into a law.

I should say openly that the United States of America and Russia had negotiations there on another issue. [Former Foreign Minister Hasan] Hasanov knows that, too. Maybe [Deputy Foreign Minister Araz] Azimov also knows that.

He was there, too. Tofiq Zulfugarov also knows that. [Former US State Secretary] Warren Christopher met the Russian foreign minister there and in order to resolve their problem, they agreed that Russia and France would be cochairmen of the Minsk Group. After that, the situation remained the same till December 1996.

[Subhead] Peace efforts between 1996 and 1998 yield no results

There was certain progress at the Lisbon summit in December 1996. Before that, it was impossible to do anything. But in Budapest in December 1994, first we determined the issue of cochairmanship in the Minsk Group and second, the first decision was taken there that the OSCE would create peacekeeping forces and if an agreement is reached, then the peacekeeping forces of the OSCE and not of another country would enter our region. We presumed that the peacekeeping forces would comprise members of various countries that do not have an interest here. This was a very important decision. We managed to achieve this.

We almost achieved progress at the Lisbon summit. It is clear what. It was written down for the first time that the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and Armenia should be recognized, Nagornyy Karabakh should be given a high degree of self-government and the security of the Nagornyy Karabakh population - both Armenian and Azerbaijani - should be guaranteed.

It has already been said here in a report. I must tell you everything openly.

This is not a very acceptable thing for us, but we wanted to make some progress. That's why we regarded it as a great step forward. This project was prepared in Finland, then it was prepared in Vienna and brought to Lisbon. In Lisbon, Armenia was totally against this project. We have said repeatedly how hard we tried there. Armenia was against it. The rule there is that there should be consensus. The consensus failed.

I have said this, you know. I was forced, maybe it is a rare thing in the history of diplomacy that I took such a step. I did not agree with the decision of the entire Lisbon summit. Thus, if one country does not agree with a decision, the decision cannot be adopted by the Lisbon summit. Why did I do that? To force the countries participating in the summit to at least show an attitude towards Azerbaijan. The well-known declaration was adopted after that. Armenia did not vote for it, but 53 countries did.

What is the following period? After the Lisbon summit, we thought that the Minsk Group cochairmen should become stronger. Finland quit the cochairmanship and Russia remained. The United States of America offered its services and we accepted them. We offered the United States of America. Neither Armenia nor Russia agreed to this. They accepted France. We did not agree with this. Finally, since the states could not reach agreement with each other, there were not two, but three cochairmen - Russia, the United States of America and France. You should know that before that, the Minsk Group had not given us any concrete written proposal.

I am saying again that the Russian representative, Kazimirov, was working very actively on the one hand. Every two or three months, our representatives met Armenian representatives and even Nagornyy Karabakh representatives in Moscow or in other places. There were no results. The Minsk Group was already cochaired by three great powers and we demanded that you give your concrete proposals.

[Subhead] Rejects all three OSCE Minsk Group peace proposals

Vilayat Quliyev spoke about these proposals here. The first proposal, the "package settlement" proposal, was presented in June 1997. Now you can say or someone will say, why did you accept it? We accepted it to see whether we can go forward or not. I even remember when I met Clinton in Washington, in the White House, on 1 August, he assessed this very highly. He even asked me to say in my speech - because he also spoke, made a speech and so did I - that we are accepting this. I did. Armenia did not accept it.

Then the second "stage-by-stage settlement" proposal was put forward. We accepted it again. Not because it was favourable for us. It is true that it was more favourable than the previous one. Vilayat Quliyev said that. But we wanted some activity there. Armenia did not accept it either. Vilayat Quliyev spoke about the following processes.

Finally, Ter-Petrosyan in Armenia accepted the second proposal. In Strasbourg we made a joint statement on working together on its basis. The opposition to Ter-Petrosyan in Armenia came to the fore. Thus, in February 1998, Ter-Petrosyan resigned and Kocharyan was elected president some time later. In 1998 there was nothing and the Minsk Group did not give us anything. Why are you not giving anything? They said we are waiting till Armenia elects a new president, forms a government, this and that. We waited and finally, they brought us the "common state" proposal at the end of 1998. In Azerbaijan there is a saying - this is blacker than black. Compared to the previous proposals, this was even more detrimental to Azerbaijan.

Those who participated in those negotiations can remember. As soon as I heard about it, I said that we do not even want to discuss this. They tried very hard to explain. I said I do not want to discuss this. You are bringing us into a situation in which there are two states on Azerbaijani territory - Azerbaijan and Nagornyy Karabakh - and Azerbaijan has no right to Nagornyy Karabakh. You are papering things over and saying that Azerbaijan's territorial integrity is preserved in this way. I said: do you think that we are so stupid that we cannot understand what this is? We turned it down. But Armenia accepted this and Armenia is still saying everywhere that if Azerbaijan had accepted the "common state" formula at the end of 1998, peace would have been established and the conflict would have come to an end. Of course, in their favour. That is the situation.

You should know that conducting a discussion today, I am telling you that all three proposals are now history. We cannot return to them any more. I think that the latest proposal was a great provocation against Azerbaijan and we totally reject it. Since then, the Minsk Group has not come up with any new

proposal.

Both yesterday and today, I heard that there was various talks when presenting these issues and proposals to the press. Even the opposition parties in our country, organizations and others got together and kicked up a racket that Heydar Aliyev wants to accept the "common state" formula, that he is trying to make parliament accept it and this and that. You know, the horror is that this is the trouble of our people and nation.

[Subhead] Reproaches media, opposition for kicking up a racket

Hey, countrymen! People nursing groundless political ambitions! You have been invited here. Come and listen! If Heydar Aliyev is not protecting Azerbaijan's interests on this issue, come and break his neck!

But they are inventing things and kicking up a racket. ANS television reported last night that 50 political parties had decided to stage actions. You know, I would advise ANS television to act more on the basis of the principle of justice than on the principle of sensation. In fact, there are not even 40 parties in Azerbaijan. Those, who call themselves a party, are not a party. Even if count them, there cannot be 50 parties. We know all the parties that were registered, and they were invited. But Murtuz muallim [form of address - Speaker of the Azerbaijani parliament] says that some of them have not come. Why have they not come? On the one hand, you want discussions, you want us to make public our ideas, you want to know everything. On the other hand, you invent lies without knowing anything and kick up a fuss. Someone says it is necessary to stage an action, someone else says that we should raise the people. Let them know that no-one can do this. Azerbaijan has its constitution, Azerbaijan has its laws. Those times have passed. Azerbaijan is a powerful state. You can conduct any type of activities that fall within the constitution, within the framework of negotiations, within democratic principles, within the principles of political pluralism, within the rule of law. But those who try to carry out activities that go beyond all this will be punished. [applause]

As president of Azerbaijan, I am stating that things that took place in the past cannot be repeated. People who caused a civil war here in 1993, those who split Azerbaijan, those who supported those people - I do not want to elaborate on this - they are allegedly thinking of Azerbaijan now and thinking more than we are. That is why I am saying again that none of the published proposals was accepted or will be accepted. [applause]

This morning I was told that Armenia is very dissatisfied that Azerbaijan has violated confidentiality and published the proposals. This information was given to me yesterday as well. They even turned to the Minsk Group. I was told this morning that they have also published the latest proposal - the "common state" formula.

First, we never promised anyone to keep them secret. Yes, I thought and I think today that the negotiating process should be kept secret. Information should be given after achieving a result. I am saying this to you today as well. I am telling the entire public and people. If we achieve a result and come to a decision or idea, no-one, including President Heydar Aliyev, can conceal it.

There is no doubt that the Milli Maclis should discuss this first. Then it should be put out for debate by the people. If the people and the Milli Maclis do not accept it, can Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev solve the problem on his own? First of all, know that today or tomorrow, Heydar Aliyev will not accept anything that is against the interests of the Azerbaijani people. [applause]

Second, if there is any idea that something can be done as a result of some compromises, this will never be a secret. The negotiating process is going on and will be going on in secret. Because if we make public this negotiating process and bring it out into the open, nothing will happen.

But what is my purpose today? My purpose today is that you should know everything. The public and people should know and say what to do. Why am I saying that? Because the Minsk Group has not given any proposal since the "common state" formula.

In Washington, at the 50th anniversary of NATO in April 1999, the US leadership, President Clinton and State Secretary Albright asked me to meet Kocharyan and talk. We met and talked. It turned out there that we can reach agreement on some issues. That's why this negotiating process continued. In 1999 we met several times. To this end, I went to Geneva twice and then we met on the border. I can say that it proved possible to bring the positions very close in October 1999. But after the 1999 terrorist act in the Armenian parliament, Armenia gave up the little agreement we reached.

After these meetings resumed, the Minsk Group is saying, its cochairmen are saying, the OSCE is saying and the Council of Europe is saying, the leaders of the European Union were here two days ago, they are also saying that the two presidents should solve the issue and whatever the solution is, we will agree with it. It is very difficult for the presidents to solve it. The territory of one country's president is occupied and there are one million refugees. The other country's president has great economic difficulties, but his army is keeping Azerbaijani lands under occupation.

[Subhead] Details his international meetings over Karabakh

Vilayat Quliyev spoke about this. But I also want to give a few figures. You know, since 1993 up till now, I have had 485 meetings with the leaders of 68 countries. Either I paid an official visit or they visited Azerbaijan. Most of the meetings took place when we were at international organizations. In all these meetings and even in the meeting with the sultan of Brunei, I raised this issue and discussed it. I asked them to help Azerbaijan and side with Azerbaijan.

I have the list of these meetings here. For example, I have discussed this issue with the US president and foreign minister [secretary of state] 18 times, 16 times with the French president, 28 times with the Russian president and many times with all the Turkish leaders - 78 times. I do not want to waste your time with this.

With the leadership of the United Nations - former Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and now with Kofi Annan, I have had dozens of meetings on the matter. Remember Boutros Ghali came here and spoke. I have addressed UN summits three times. My addresses were published and in all of them I criticized the United Nations because it is not fulfilling its resolutions. What did they say? They said we adopt resolutions but have no mechanism to implement them. What can I do about this?

I have said this at three NATO summits - in Washington, Madrid and other places. I have met NATO secretary-generals four times. I have told them all. At OSCE summits - I have already said that - in Budapest, Lisbon and the last time in Istanbul.

The press, I see, is writing that the problem was allegedly resolved at the Istanbul summit, this and that happened. This is a lie. Why are you writing what you do not know? Why are you inventing things that you do not know?

Nothing was resolved there. The US foreign minister Albright, the French, Russian and Turkish foreign ministers, the OSCE chairman, and I think it was with the Norwegian prime minister that the two presidents discussed the issue and could not come up with anything.

We are a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States. There was not a meeting of heads of state when I did not raise the issue. Our friends, brothers and other countries are not saying that Armenia is an aggressor. The word "fight against separatism" comes up in some documents of the CIS and Armenia objects to this. But I insist that the word "fight against separatism" should be written there. All the heads of state ask me to withdraw my proposal, including our brothers - the Central Asian countries.

The Organization of Islamic Conference has had two summits. I addressed them and spoke. The Economic Cooperation Organization - ECO - has had four summits. The leaders of the Turkic-language countries have had five summits. I have had so many meetings.

I also want to say that Turkey, our friendly and brotherly country, regards Armenia as an aggressor and says so everywhere. The Organization of Islamic Conference is the only organization where we can write in resolutions the formula of Armenia's aggression against Azerbaijan and where we can object to this aggression. Iran is saying - yes, Armenia has invaded Azerbaijan.

But apart from this, no country in the world is saying that Armenia has invaded Azerbaijan. The UN Security Council has adopted four resolutions. I asked Vilayat Quliyev to look at those resolutions. I also looked at them this morning. All four resolutions say that the occupation army should be withdrawn from the occupied Azerbaijani territories. But there is no word Armenia, I mean there are no words Armenian Armed Forces. But one of the resolutions says that Armenia is required to put pressure on Nagornyy Karabakh. In reality, Armenia and Azerbaijan are at war. But no international organization in its documents, except for what I said, and no country regards Armenia as the aggressor in its statements.

We are saying - I have rammed this formula down the people's throat - the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, the Nagornyy Karabakh conflict. But others are saying - the Nagornyy Karabakh conflict. Because everyone is saying this conflict is not between two countries, but between Nagornyy Karabakh and Azerbaijan. I have said many times, if this is the case, let Armenia stay away. Then we shall negotiate with Nagornyy Karabakh and what we do is our problem. We can solve it very quickly. But now Nagornyy Karabakh and Armenia are one country. They have been one country for 11 years. But no-one wants to admit this.

Now everyone is appealing to me over my meeting with Kocharyan. You are a strong leader, strong-willed and so on. Solve the problem. I say how should I solve it? Tell Armenia to take a constructive stance on the issue so that we can take it, too. Then we will solve it. They say Armenia is miserable, Armenia is poor, Armenia's economy is facing difficulties, this and that.

[Subhead] Accuses world of double standards, bias towards Azerbaijan

The big powers, the US Congress or the parliaments of other countries have an intimate relationship with Armenia, but not with Azerbaijan. In spite of the fact that we are the country which has suffered aggression. We witnessed this during our admittance to the Council of Europe. However, the opposition here was trying, so to speak, to blame the Azerbaijani leadership again, saying that there is no democracy or something here. That is why they did not let us into the Council of Europe.

I have said it openly and I said it in my speech in Strasbourg. I told the whole Council of Europe that it is necessary to give up double standards in the world. I am also saying today that there are double standards in the world.

I once asked someone: elections have been held in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. What is the difference between them? Tell me the truth. He said there is not much difference. I asked why they were blaming us that elections were violated here or something else happened, and not them? They do not answer and pass over this in silence. I do not think that elections were violated in our country. At the same time, I do not think that everything is absolutely perfect in our country. I do not think so. I have said repeatedly that everything has its own stage. If we take that stage, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, we are all on the same level. But according to economic development, we are streets ahead of both Georgia and Armenia. We are streets ahead in internal stability. What does the country need? The country needs peace. The country needs internal political stability. The country needs economic development. But these issues are marginalized and some are saying democracy, democracy and democracy. Those who say democracy are simply abusing it.

I have said and am saying. In Azerbaijan, there is democracy, democracy is developing and it will develop. Let no-one abuse this issue. No-one can influence Azerbaijan with their various possibilities. Our Azerbaijan has its own way. Our people have their own mentality. Let no-one presume that there will be democracy like in France here in Azerbaijan today. You should live many years for that.

That's why I am saying that I have to bring these double standards to your attention. These double standards are now being applied in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict: they are poor and they have to be saved. Your country has natural riches, a great future, this and that, solve it. How should I solve it? Now you are also asking. How should I solve it?

One thing that is clear to me from all the discussions and Minsk Group proposals is that they want to solve the problem by giving Nagornyy Karabakh status close to independence or complete independence. This can be seen from all the Minsk Group proposals, nothing else. We have not agreed to that and cannot agree.

I do not want to make public our talks with Kocharyan. But one thing that is clear is that they have occupied our territory and their main purpose is, in a word, that from now on, Nagornyy Karabakh cannot be under the control of the Azerbaijani state in any form. This is their idea.

I am conducting these negotiations and will conduct them. French President Chirac telephoned me some time ago. Because we, Kocharyan and I, had a face-to-face meeting there on 26 January and then the three of us met together. He telephoned me some time ago that Kocharyan had come to France again. Can you come here to have another face-to-face meeting? I did not mind. On 4th March, I will have a face-to-face meeting with Kocharyan in Paris and the three presidents - President Chirac, President Kocharyan and the Azerbaijani president - will meet.

Now someone can say that France has adopted a "genocide" bill. Why are you going there? These are different issues. The settlement of this issue has nothing to do with that. We have expressed our protest against France's unfair decision and we are expressing it. We have said it straight to President Chirac's face. But at the same time, France is a cochairman of the Minsk Group. If there is an opportunity and something can be achieved, we

should take it and cannot miss it. That's why I am going to this meeting. I cannot say what will happen and what will not. But I want to say that the situation is very difficult.

Vilayat Quliyev said here that the Minsk Group has stopped its activities. The Minsk Group has not stopped its activities. For example, the fact that one of the Minsk Group cochairs, President Chirac, is dealing with this issue shows that the Minsk Group cochairs have not stopped their activities. When we say the Minsk Group cochairs, we are talking about their representatives, but the most important are their heads of state.

For example, when Russian President Vladimir Putin came here, I had a detailed face-to-face conversation with him lasting two or three hours. Then we talked over the telephone. For this reason, the Minsk Group has not stopped its activities now. I have stated many times that the Minsk Group and its cochairmen should know that the direct meetings between the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents should proceed in parallel with the activities of the Minsk Group. This does not replace and will not replace its activities. I have said this many times and am saying it again. Thus, we should both intensify the activities of the Minsk Group and use our own possibilities comprehensively.

I explained the situation to you. I have done everything possible so far. Not only me, but, of course, our relevant executive bodies are also broadly participating in it. The Milli Maclis is participating in it. But it's natural that I bear the main brunt of the negotiations. At the same time, our foreign minister and deputy foreign ministers are conducting negotiations. The negotiations are going on at other levels as well. When our parliament representatives go to different countries, they raise this issue. That's to say we are all doing that. As for the main negotiations with the Minsk Group, either those working in our executive authorities or directly I am conducting them.

What is my purpose? This is the situation. You said let us discuss it in the Milli Maclis. Someone says let us set up a commission. Tell me what this commission can do, what it is capable of and what kind of proposals can it put forward?

For Azerbaijani political parties - whether opposition or non-opposition parties, it is not difficult to kick up a racket. This racket is already gone. Some said in the run-up to the elections that we have a concept. Give me the concept! You are blaming Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev for being unable to solve this issue in seven years. I am telling you what the situation is. You are saying that you can solve it - give me your concept. If you do not give it to me, give it to the Milli Maclis. If you do not give it to the Milli Maclis, give it to the Minsk Group. If you do not give it to the Minsk Group, give it to the United Nations. Give, give and give! But none of you has either a concept or a proposal or any idea about the complexity and depth of this issue.

[Subhead] Azerbaijan has an army capable of waging war

But nevertheless, I am once again appealing to the Milli Maclis members, representatives of our public, especially, as they say, to the cream of Azerbaijani society - our scientists, artists, writers and other members of the intelligentsia. I am appealing to all political parties, even to those which treat me as an enemy: give us your proposals. If you ignore me, that is OK. Give them to the Minsk Group. If you ignore the parliament, that is OK. This is your own business. Give them to the Minsk Group. Bring them, as well as you showed them in your TV speeches on papers - your first concept and your second concept. But God knows what was on the paper. You can show this

paper five times, saying one concept, two concepts, three concepts etc. If you have a concept on this issue, take it to the Minsk Group. I will create conditions for you to meet the cochairmen of the Minsk Group. You will give it to them on paper and explain to them that the problem can be solved in this way.

But there are various statements saying that, for instance, Nagornyy Karabakh should be granted cultural autonomy, we must not grant Nagornyy Karabakh a regional autonomy, etc. Let us think reasonably. They did not tolerate this regional autonomy created in 1923 and started war and aggression in 1988, so much blood was shed, they occupied our lands. Can we now return to them that regional autonomy? This is not possible.

Some people say: we should fight a war or we should have a strong army. Azerbaijan does have a strong army. I discussed this several times at the Security Council. Azerbaijan has a strong army. We can fight a war. But should we? Those who back the war, let them write down what the results of this war would be.

First, apart from Nagornyy Karabakh we have seven other districts under occupation. People are living in tents. So much time will be needed, so much blood will be shed to liberate each of the occupied districts. Second, who will accept the war in the world today? Third, an idea was formed in the world from the very beginning that Azerbaijanis slaughtered Armenians there. If we start a war now, they will say: look, Azerbaijanis again want to slaughter Armenians as they did in the past. But I am not avoiding war. If our society makes this decision and substantiates it, if people wanting war draw up a certain strategy and say that we definitely need a war and how to wage this war, our army will be able to do this. Do not worry at all.

Some people say that no, we should create a strong army during the next five or 10 years and then start [a war]. Others say let us freeze the issue. How long can we freeze it for? For example, we will freeze the problem for another five years. And let the poor refugees live in tents for another five years? What will we do then?

Some people are suggesting such an idea because Armenia's economy is in a very bad state, people are leaving the country, etc. There is a grain of truth in it. Armenia's economy is in a bad state. But Georgia's economy is in an even worse state. Everyone, all world experts, representatives - I received EU leaders two days ago, they have full information - say that our country has a strong economy. How long should we wait for the Armenian economy to be destroyed, for Armenia to be completely destroyed, for Nagornyy Karabakh to be destroyed, so we can go in and take those places? How long should we wait? If there is such an idea, then substantiate it. I mean, I am ready to consider all proposals seriously and with full responsibility. That is why I have given you this information.

The aim of today's discussion should not be just to make suggestions. I am asking speakers - do not speak about history or about who is to blame, or not to blame, why this happened, push this aside. This can be done later. What should we do today? How can we solve this problem? We should liberate the occupied lands. We should at least liberate the occupied districts around Nagornyy Karabakh.

I did not expect my speech to be so long. Anyhow, I suppose that the problem is so complicated that I had to inform you about it in detail. I am waiting for your proposals. I am waiting for your assistance. I want our people to unite and solve this problem hand in hand. Thank you. [applause]