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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Moscow Hosts Armenia-Azerbaijan Talks as Fighting Continues

By Hervé Bar for AFP

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Putin's invitation came as there appeared to be no end in sight for the fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh. **Kremlin.ru**

Armenia and Azerbaijan held their first high-level talks in Moscow on Friday after nearly two weeks of fierce clashes over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, amid hopes that a ceasefire could be brokered.

The talks between the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia continued for some six hours but it was not immediately clear if the ministers would speak to reporters afterwards.

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova did not provide an immediate comment on the progress of the negotiations.

A spokesman for the Armenian defense ministry told reporters that fighting continued despite the talks in Moscow.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, who has repeatedly vowed to use his military to retake the breakaway province, said earlier in the day that the talks represented a historic opportunity for Armenia.

"We are giving Armenia a chance to settle the conflict peacefully," he said. "This is their last chance."

Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said his country was "ready for the resumption of the peace process" led by international brokers.

France, which along with Russia and the United States is part of a group mediating the two countries' long conflict, said there was a chance of a breakthrough at the talks but it was far from certain.

"We are moving towards a truce tonight or tomorrow but it's still fragile," President Emmanuel Macron's office said in a statement to AFP.

Armenian and Azerbaijani defense officials said heavy clashes continued into Friday and reported further civilian deaths, after Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the meeting in Moscow late Thursday and appealed for a ceasefire on humanitarian grounds.

Shelling started again on Friday in Stepanakert, the provincial capital of Karabakh, where an AFP journalist heard several loud explosions and saw the remains of a rocket in a crater next to a cemetery for dead soldiers.

Waving flags of Nagorno-Karabakh, hundreds of demonstrators in an Armenian suburb of Lebanese capital Beirut took part in a show of solidarity with the embattled enclave.

Mediation efforts

Renewed fighting over Karabakh -- an ethnic Armenian region of Azerbaijan that broke from Baku's control in a devastating war in the early 1990s -- has claimed some 400 lives and forced thousands of people from their homes.

The heavy clashes erupted late last month, with both sides blaming the other for the biggest outbreak in violence since a 1994 ceasefire left the status of Karabakh in limbo.

The region's declaration of independence has not been recognized by any country -- even Armenia -- and the international community regards it as part of Azerbaijan.

The Kremlin said late on Thursday that following a series of calls with Pashinyan and Aliyev, Putin had invited their foreign ministers to Moscow and called for an end to hostilities "to exchange dead bodies and prisoners".

Putin's announcement of the talks came shortly after international mediators from France, Russia and the United States launched their first efforts to resolve the fighting in Geneva.

The countries make up the "Minsk Group" that has sought a solution to the Karabakh conflict for decades but have failed to stop sporadic outbreaks of fighting.

The negotiations in Geneva went ahead without Armenia, which refused to participate while the fighting was ongoing, and there were no public statements following the closed-door talks.

Mounting civilian toll

During a visit to Armenian capital Yerevan, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin reiterated that Russia was prepared to help bring about peace alongside Minsk Group members.

"It's important to make sure that all hostilities are halted and to start a diplomatic settlement of the conflict," he said.

Since the fighting restarted both sides have accused the other of shelling areas populated by civilians and thousands of people have been displaced by the clashes.

Stepanakert is dotted with damaged buildings and unexploded ordnance following days of shelling. AFP journalists have also witnessed destruction in villages in Azerbaijan near the front line.

Armenia accused Azerbaijan on Thursday of hitting the iconic Ghazanchetsots (Holy Saviour) Cathedral leaving a gaping hole in its roof and several journalists injured.

Embed:

> BREAKING: We just got back from the church in #Shushi 20 kilometer from #Stepanakert. The church got hit some hours ago, terrible destruction inside. Thank god, the kids plus parents who were in the basement hiding didnt got injured. #KarabakhWar @BILD pic.twitter.com/SalupTprqP
>
> — Paul Ronzheimer (@ronzheimer) October 8, 2020

Armenia's rights ombudsman Artak Beglaryan told AFP this week that the renewed fighting has displaced around half of Karabakh's 140,000 residents and forced some 90 percent of its women and children from their homes.

Dozens of civilians have been confirmed killed and the Armenian side has acknowledged 350 military deaths, while Azerbaijan has not admitted to any fatalities among its troops.

Turkey's strong backing for Azerbaijan has sown fears in the West that the conflict could spiral into a full-blown war embroiling Ankara and Moscow, which has a military treaty with Armenia.

Putin and Macron are among the world leaders to denounce the reported deployment of pro-Turkish fighters from Syria and Libya to Karabakh and Iran this week warned of "terrorists" who had joined the conflict from abroad.

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