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'Difficult Moment for Russia' as Fighting Flares Between Armenia and Azerbaijan

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Azerbaijani soldiers. **Stanislav Krasilnikov / TASS**

YEREVAN, Armenia — Russia said Tuesday it had negotiated a ceasefire between ex-Soviet Armenia and Azerbaijan after clashes between the historic rivals left at least 49 Armenian troops dead.

The Armenian Defense Ministry said the fighting started early Tuesday, with the Armenian cities of Goris, Sotk, and Jermuk coming under fire from Azerbaijani artillery, mortars and drones.

"My family and I woke up because of the shelling when [the area] was attacked at about midnight," said Anna, who lives in the Armenian town of Vardenis about 20 kilometers from the border with Azerbaijan and declined to give her surname.

"We were hearing the sound of rockets. It was very scary," she told The Moscow Times.

The deadly fighting came as Yerevan's closest ally Moscow — which has thousands of

peacekeepers in the region — was distracted by its six-month invasion of Ukraine.

Russia said it had brought the clashes to a halt, with the Russian Foreign Ministry saying a ceasefire was agreed from 9:00 a.m. Moscow time.

“The situation is very painful,” said Nina, a Yerevan resident who declined to give her surname. “I’m just thinking of how to defend my home if they come.”

Experts warned that the Kremlin’s war in Ukraine has weakened Russia and raised the chances of further escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

“Russia is currently neither willing nor capable of restraining Azerbaijani aggression in the region,” said Tigran Grigoryan, a Yerevan-based political expert, adding that there was a “regional power vacuum” because of Moscow’s focus on Ukraine.

The fighting appeared to have died down Tuesday evening, following an intense round of diplomacy, and Baku announcing that it had achieved its immediate aims.

"Provocations committed by Armenian forces at the border have been averted and all necessary objectives were fulfilled," Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev's office said in a statement.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan told lawmakers Tuesday morning that at least 49 Armenian soldiers were killed in Azerbaijani attacks.

President Vladimir Putin’s spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said that the Kremlin was doing everything it could to resolve the situation.

“Obviously, the president is making every effort to help de-escalate tensions on the border,” Peskov said. “It is difficult to overestimate the role of the Russian Federation and [Russian President Vladimir] Putin.”

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday called the leaders of both Armenia and Azerbaijan, with his spokesman saying Washington would “push for an immediate halt to fighting and a peace settlement.”

But there was anger in Yerevan at what is perceived to be Russian inaction — Russian peacekeepers were deployed to the region in 2020 following a bloody war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

“Russia needs to take a clear position,” former Armenian lawmaker Arman Abovyan told The Moscow Times.

“The situation is unprecedented — the state of Azerbaijan attacked the state of Armenia... it is an attempt to annex the territory of Armenia. It is not a coincidence that this has occurred when Russia is completely focused on the situation in Ukraine,” he said.

Baku's long-standing political and military sponsor Turkey blamed Armenia and urged it instead to "focus on peace negotiations."

Iran, which shares a border with both countries, urged "restraint" and a "peaceful resolution" to the fighting.

The European Union, France and the U.S. have expressed concerns over the escalation and called for an end to the hostilities.

Before the ceasefire was announced, Armenia appealed to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Moscow-led security alliance of post-Soviet states.

“For Russia, this is a difficult moment — it will be a severe blow to the prestige of Russia and the CSTO organization to leave Armenia without help, but at the same time, Russia doesn’t want to spoil its relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey,” Mikayel Zolyan, a former Armenian lawmaker and political analyst, told The Moscow Times.

The current situation echoes two previous wars in the region over Nagorno-Karabakh in the 1990s and in 2020.

Six weeks of fighting in the autumn of 2020 claimed more than 6,500 lives and ended with a Russian-brokered ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

“On the one hand, Russia is an ally of Armenia and a member of the CSTO, but at the same time, Azerbaijan has a number of agreements with Russia and Russia considers Azerbaijan its ally as well. Plus, Russia is a mediator in the Karabakh conflict,” Zolyan said.

“All three roles are quite difficult to combine, and therefore we see that all parties are dissatisfied with Russia.”

AFP contrinuted reporting.

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