

Dispatch from the Conflict Zone during Azerbaijan's Patriotic War

Elmira Musazadeh*

Journalistic Dispatch titled "Dispatch from the Conflict Zone during Azerbaijan's Patriotic War" prepared by Azerbaijani war correspondent Elmira Musazadeh covered the war zone with compilation of photo shots from her field trip. Her emotional story narrates that from the very first day of the Second Karabakh War the Armenian armed forces deliberately and overtly resorted to targeting with constant artillery shelling the peaceful citizens, villages and cities in the front-line districts.



* **Elmira Musazadeh** is war correspondent, anchor and editor at Caspian International Broadcasting Company, Baku, Azerbaijan.

When going to a war zone, all journalists are typically advised to wear a vest with a bright “PRESS” logo to make it obvious that they are a correspondent and not a participant in the hostilities. Male or female, they, too, are civilians. As envisioned, this measure was taken in the recent war to ensure the safety and protect the lives of media representatives. After all, peaceful and unarmed people should, under no circumstances, become targets or come under fire.

In the Nagorno-Karabakh war zone, the situation was exactly the opposite. The Armenian armed forces deliberately and overtly resorted to targeting peaceful citizens as a military provocation. From the very first day of the Second Karabakh War, September 27, villages and cities in the front-line districts (Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Goranboy, and Aghdam), were under constant artillery shelling from the Armenian forces. Hundreds of shells were hitting these areas every day.

When the war began in the Terter district of Azerbaijan, the first reports of the artillery shelling of residential buildings in Gapanli village of Terter district began to air between 6 and 7 a.m. After a couple of hours, when our film crew was deployed to the area to document the devastating effects of the Armenian forces’ military provocations, the sounds of artillery shots were clearly audible on the approach to this district. Armenian troops fired large-caliber weapons and heavy artillery, such as BM-21 “Grad” multiple rocket launch systems and D-20 and D-30 howitzers, at civilian residential settlements.

Despite the heavy shelling, not one of the local residents was willing to leave their homes. Fortunately, every personal house in the front-line area has a special bunker dug into the ground and roofed with metal plates to shelter civilians during such massive artillery-rocket bombardment and protect them from shrapnel.

A resident of Gapanli village, Kamran Gurbanov, showed us one of these temporary shelters. He said that sometimes they had to wait within the shelter for several hours. Then he started to collect the fragments from the Grad, D-20 and D-30 shelling that had hit his property. After several days of the war plenty of these had already accumulated in the surrounding area. Despite the constant danger, he was resolute about not leaving the village: *“I am not afraid of anything,”* he said, setting the table right there in the yard close to the shelter, and added, *“how can I leave when our soldiers are at the forefront to protect us? We*



Kamran Gurbanov shows one of the temporary shelters

need to be their support and help.” The drill of running into the shelter together with his family members at the first sound of shooting had already become a routine.

Such preparations, including the moral aspect, originate from the fact that the residents of the front-line regions have been facing regular Armenian provocations for almost 30 years. The sound of shots from machine guns and artillery never stopped here throughout the entire period of the conflict. During both the fighting of April 2016 and the current war, the Terter district, including its villages, emerged as the main target of the Armenian armed forces. Billboards announcing “Caution! War zone!” hang at the entrance to the settlement and informative posters, with photographs, notify local residents and visitors about the barbaric acts perpetrated by the enemy and the destruction caused during the early years of First Karabakh



Shelling of school building in Eskipara village of Terter district, Azerbaijan

War (1992–1994) and the fighting four years ago, in April 2016. One of these posters was mounted in the secondary school in the village of Eskipara; the photographs showed the severely damaged school building, with broken glass and demolished walls, caused by artillery shells falling onto the schoolyard in 2016. Four years later, during the Second Karabakh War, shells hit the building itself, leaving just fragments of desks and chalkboards from some of the classrooms. It is likely that no one would have survived if anyone had been inside the school during the shelling. One can barely find an intact building in the entire village. Yet some areas were even less fortunate; in these, the residential buildings caught fire from the rocket explosions, leaving

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only ashes afterwards. When incessant shelling began in the front-line districts, most of the men decided to send their women, children, and the elderly to safer neighboring areas. However, they themselves did not leave their homes.

Despite all the destruction caused by the Armenian units, the resilience of the local residents was striking. Inspecting the destruction, or even the literal ruins, of former residential buildings, the residents of Terter, Aghdam, and Goranboy districts (the territories that suffered more than others) waved their hands and said that “*the most important thing for everyone is to be safe and sound.*” The houses will be rebuilt and the economy restored. But, unfortunately, there is something that cannot be restored: that is, human life. In the entire course of the hostilities, 110 civilians were killed as a result of missile and artillery attacks by Armenian forces. The worst thing is that small children were among them. Behind each of these numbers lies a human story, a terrible tragedy, which cannot be forgotten.

Our film crew headed from the neighboring village of Guzanly, Aghdam district, to the village of Garayusifli in Barda district, when we were informed about the shelling of residential buildings there. Arriving at the scene, we were horrified not by the sight of a destroyed house, but by a father bending over his dead daughter, Aysu Iskandarova, a seven-year-old little girl. A missile fragment hit her near her own house. The injury was serious, and her vital organs were affected. No matter how hard her father tried to stop the bleeding by bandaging her numerous wounds, the child died before the ambulance arrived. A little later, the

grief-stricken father remembers each second of the tragedy, saying that he will never forget the fear in the eyes of his dying daughter. With tears in his eyes, an adult man asks everyone around him “*where does such cruelty come from? Why do Armenian units shoot innocent children?*” Unfortunately, no one can answer his questions.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs), who had to leave their native lands at the end of the last century following the Armenian occupation, live tight together in the settlement of Shikharkh in Terter district. Their geographical origins are diverse. There are natives of the (previously occupied) Zangilan, Gubadli, and Kalbajar districts and the city of Shusha. But the main portion of the population is still in the nearby (previously partially occupied) Aghdam and Terter districts.

“*We have already had to leave our homes once, leave shelter and lands and retreat.*” Gurban, a resident of Shikharkh settlement and an IDP from the now-liberated Suqovushan settlement, shares his revelation while we are hiding from another bout of shelling in the basement of a residential building. “*We will not retreat even a step back any more,*” he says. Gurban’s grief is understandable. Over many years, an entire infrastructure had been built up in the village, including a school, a hospital, a small number of shops, and even a music academy. Now, all that remains of the academy is the frame; the glass walls have been turned into fragments, and the only music playing there during the war was formed by the incessant explosions of shells. Other buildings suffered, too. Here, a shell hit the roof; elsewhere one flew into a second-floor balcony, almost completely destroying all the apartments inside. However, those living in Shikharkh settlement are not the only refugees in these territories.



Shikharkh settlement, Terter district, Azerbaijan

Even though the Armenian community were not the indigenous inhabitants of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, all their fundamental rights were respected in Azerbaijan. They were often represented on local authorities and the two peoples lived here quite amicably until the territorial claims of Armenian nationalists emerged.

During filming in the very center of Shikharkh village, we come across a monument called *Maragha-150*, which was erected in 1978 at the request of the Armenian community of the Terter and Aghdam districts on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the resettlement of Armenians there from the Iranian village of Maragha. The dates 1828–1978 and the number 150 were engraved on the monument. In 1991, however, this monument was destroyed by the local Armenians themselves to hide the fact of their resettlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. Just a couple of years ago, the Azerbaijani authorities managed to open the archives and restore the historical statue, once again revealing the attempts of Armenians to falsify history. Even though the Armenian community were not the indigenous

inhabitants of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, all their fundamental rights were respected in Azerbaijan. They were often represented on local authorities and the two peoples lived here quite amicably until the territorial claims of Armenian nationalists emerged.



A woman living in Horadiz settlement, Azerbaijan. She is showing a shell fragment.

This was not the case only in Terter. A resident of Horadiz settlement of Fuzuli district says that three of her neighbors were of Armenian ethnicity. As if it took place just yesterday, she starts to remember the Karabakh war of the early 1990s, when the peaceful Azerbaijani population suffered atrocities at the hands of the Armenian armed forces. The First Karabakh war took away the life of her brother, who sacrificed himself for the sake of the territorial integrity of the country. This time Armenian forces completely destroyed her home when an artillery shell hit the residential building, causing a massive fire. By the time

rescuers arrived, there was practically nothing left of the house.

A similar situation was faced by locals in Khindiristan village of Aghdam district. This is one of ten villages in Aghdam district that were liberated from an occupation that went back to the 1990s. Arriving at the site of shelling, our film crew found only ashes. A representative of the local fire department, who was extinguishing the remnants of the fire and coughing heavily from the terrible smoke, said that *“as soon as they noticed the smoke that had risen as a result of a rocket shelling, the Armenian troops were deliberately shooting at the same place, realizing that firefighters would be working there, and that ambulances and the victims could be there, and were thus trying to increase the number of wounded [persons].”* The cars of the Ministry of Emergency Situations came under massive fire several times. While examining the shrapnel holes from the missile fragments over their car, we understood that the firemen survived only because they were moving at high speed. A little later, another artillery shell fired by Armenian troops hit a cotton processing plant. Having left for the scene with the fire department, we were asked to leave the location of the incident in a rush, as enemy shots were arriving only a few seconds apart.



A house in Aghdam district (Azerbaijan) completely destroyed by fire.

Later on, we had an encounter with another example of the violence of the Armenian forces, perpetrated with the use of Smerch cluster munitions against civilians in Goranboy district. These are weapons prohibited by international conventions, as well as by the rulings of the UN, ICRC, and others. This is not unintentional. According to

the employees of the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA), cluster munitions consist of several containers that unfold in the air and distribute their payload over a vast territory, causing tremendous damage to all objects in the vicinity. Such artillery ordnance, containing up to several hundreds of sub-munitions, can be dangerous even a long time after the attack, since the explosives in the missile core can be toxic. Thus, ANAMA employees have to manually

inspect the entire nearby area and artificially detonate all the bomblets found.



“Smerch” missile in Goranboy district, Azerbaijan

While we were watching this process, ANAMA sappers were continuously informed by radio about another series of incidents involving the shelling of civilians. The news of the Elbrus tactical ballistic missile attack on Ganja, the second largest city in Azerbaijan, 60 km away from the front line, shocked everyone. In fact, Ganja city came under missile shelling several times (on October 4, 11, and 17). Most of the missiles fired were immediately intercepted by Azerbaijani air defense

systems. Over recent years, Azerbaijan has developed one of the most echeloned (structured) air-defense systems in the world. That is to say, the skies of Azerbaijan are covered not only by a modern umbrella of anti-aircraft missile systems purchased from the world’s leading weapons manufacturers, but also by an advanced electronic warfare (EW) system. Therefore, most of the air assaults by the Armenian armed forces on peaceful residential areas were prevented.

However, in early October, a missile fired by Armenian troops hit a local market building in Ganja—fortunately with no human casualties. A couple of days later, the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia sat down at the negotiating table in Moscow, Russia, and spent about 11 hours in discussions. As a result, at the time when they agreed on a

humanitarian truce, our film crew was in Aghdam district. Despite the announced truce, we noticed that the local residents were still anxious about a possible violation of the ceasefire. One of the locals, Mammad Mammadov, recounted how he had experienced something like this back in the 1990s. As a serviceman then, he experienced how Armenian units, under the cover of “the ceasefire regime,” returned their forces to the front line and attacked Azerbaijani civilians and soldiers many times. Therefore, he could not trust the Armenian side even today, continuing to expect the next provocation, which was about to come. The ceasefire came into force at 12 noon on October 10. Half an hour later, three shells were fired at the village of Sahlabad of Terter district. The shelling did not stop that day, and in the evening, they fired at Aghdam.

Late in the night of the same day, the horrible news came about a missile hitting a large residential building in the city of Ganja. When we managed to get there in the evening, fragments and debris from the buildings were scattered everywhere up to a few kilometers from the site of this horrific incident. The closer we got, the more terrible the scene appeared: the neighboring buildings were heavily damaged, and almost all the shopping facilities were ruined. As a result of the Elbrus/Scud tactical ballistic missile attack, the apartment building was completely destroyed and a huge crater appeared in its place. Not a single intact building remained in the surroundings, and rescuers were still sorting through the rubble, trying to save anyone who had managed stay alive under the building’s wreckage. Trained dogs, special equipment, ambulances, law enforcement agencies—it seemed that all of Ganja had rallied to help the victims.

During the search and rescue works, an ethnic Russian woman was standing next to me with a scarf tied on her head and different shoes on her feet. She had obviously run out of her house in an extreme hurry. *“I live in the next block,”* she said. *“we heard a loud noise at 2 a.m. At first, we did not understand what was happening. Then the building shook so much that we thought it was an earthquake. Then there was a terrible crash, the windows were shattered. We realized that there was an attack and ran out immediately to find out how we could help the victims.”*

A retired doctor, standing a little further away, also came to help. *“We heard about shelling in front-line areas, but we could not even think that the [Armenian] occupying troops would shell Ganja. Even during the war of the 90s, such atrocities were not committed,”* he said. *“Look,*

there are no military installations here! I have lived in a neighboring house all my life and I know every corner of this area. Here is a peaceful unarmed settlement. What do the Armenian troops want to achieve in this way?" His rhetorical question is immediately answered in the crowd: *"They are trying to retaliate for their weakness at the front at the expense of civilians!"* Others agreed with this opinion.



Results of ballistic missile attack on Ganja city

While emergency employees were sorting through the rubble, a child's toy appeared from within the wreckage of a former residential building. *"They say a child has suffered,"* someone sighs nearby, *"a little girl. If only she stayed alive."* Everyone was waiting in suspense for the end of the rescue work. Fortunately, the child did survive, but many others were badly injured. In total, 11 people lost their lives as a result of the missile attack and 34 were injured. A couple of days later, preliminary

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investigation results revealed that Armenian forces were firing from an Elbrus/SCUD operational-tactical missile system. According to Gazanfar Ahmadov, ANAMA director, this weapon can even carry a nuclear warhead, which directly proves that Armenia neglects all the values of humanity. Moreover, this attack was launched not from the territory of the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region, but from the Berd region of Armenia across the nearby Armenia–Azerbaijan state border. Obviously, Armenia was trying to expand the geographical extent of the hostilities.



Results of the ballistic missile attack on Ganja city

Soon after, the residents of another large city, Barda, had to experience the next incident of Armenian aggression. At 2 p.m., right in the middle of the day, missiles with cluster munitions were fired into the center of this densely populated city. Having scattered across several kilometers, this ammunition, with its large radius of destruction, caused colossal damage to a vast civilian area. The explosions of the bomblets followed one by one, hitting about 30 shops and shopping facilities, and completely burning out more than 20 cars in the street; as a result, more than 20 people died and about 80 were injured. ANAMA employees and ambulances were operating non-stop trying to save as many people as possible. Together with our crew, the journalists from leading international media recorded all these terrible events. The military-political leadership of Armenia, by targeting civilians, once again tried to cause panic among the population.

International non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch also recorded the war crimes committed by the Armenian forces. A statement from Human Rights Watch reads thus: *“A cluster munition missile Smerch and a high-explosive fragmentation missile with a parachute deceleration were identified. As far as we [Human Rights Watch] know, the Armenian armed forces have Smerch rocket launchers.”*¹

By deliberate attacks towards civilians, Armenia violated the Geneva

¹ Human Rights Watch, “Armenia: Unlawful Rocket, Missile Strikes on Azerbaijan”, December 11, 2020, Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/11/armenia-unlawful-rocket-missile-strikes-azerbaijan> (Accessed: 7 January 2021).



Missile attack on civilian car in Barda district, Azerbaijan

Conventions for the “Protection of Civilians in Time of War” several times, and the weapons used by Armenian armed forces throughout the entire course of hostilities are strictly prohibited by international humanitarian law. Notably, the use of phosphorus munitions by the enemy was recorded on the territory of Terter district. It is impossible to get protection from phosphorus penetration, since its munitions completely burn out the air, as a result of which humans die due to lack of oxygen, and it causes severe burns when in contact with skin. Although the Armenian side denies the use of prohibited weapons, solid evidence and audio-visual facts prove their illegal conduct.

After the signing of a Declaration on the observance of the ceasefire by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Russia, and Armenia on November 10, 2020, which testified to the effective capitulation of Yerevan, our crew managed to visit the liberated lands in Fuzuli district. While entering the former military posts of Armenian forces, we discovered large quantities of munitions abandoned by the enemy units, as well as a homemade rocket launcher. Using 240-mm missiles, they fired this launcher at a range of 18 km towards densely populated Azerbaijani civilian settlements. *“These hand-crafted systems are often used in Syria. Armenians attracted mercenaries from the Middle East,”* confirmed Hikmat Hajiyev, Assistant to the President of Azerbaijan.

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Not only weapons, but also explosives and mines were used in an improvised way. In the liberated territories, it is necessary to pay attention to every single step,

since an explosive device can be located in any place; particularly in large quantities within the houses of Azerbaijanis destroyed during the war of the 1990s, in cemeteries, and at historical monuments. Our film crew personally saw anti-personnel mines in the liberated Gubadli and Jabrayil districts of Azerbaijan. However, the worst situation is being experienced in Aghdam district, where anti-personnel and anti-tank mines were installed almost every couple of meters, according to sappers' reports. The city of Aghdam, which was once one of the most densely populated in Azerbaijan, now resembles Hiroshima, with not a single building left intact. All houses were destroyed, mosques desecrated, and cultural and historical monuments can only be recognized by miraculously surviving fragments of their ornamentation. They cannot be restored or reestablished in the near future, as it is dangerous not only to come close, but even just to stray off the road.



Self-made rocket launcher of Armenian forces.



Results of the ballistic missile attack on Ganja city

In the liberated territories, it is necessary to pay attention to every single step, since an explosive device can be located in any place; particularly in large quantities within the houses of Azerbaijanis destroyed during the war of the 1990s, in cemeteries, and at historical monuments.

Moreover, during the 44 days of the war alone, employees of the National Agency for Mine Clearance of the Territories of Azerbaijan conducted over a thousand of missions just to the settlements, cities and villages where civilians live. About 400 pieces of unexploded ordnance; more than 800 pieces of exploded ammunition; almost 2,000 anti-personnel mines; and more than 200 anti-tank mines were found and neutralized. However, it will take many years to completely clear these areas. According to preliminary estimates, this process may take up to some 10 to 15 years. Despite the end of hostilities, the civilian population and the military personnel of the national army remain the victims of mines and booby traps set by Armenian units.