

WORLD & NATION

Blockade Strangling Armenian Capital

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YEREVAN, Soviet Union — For the past three weeks, the Armenian capital of Yerevan has been slowly strangled by an economic blockade imposed by the neighboring Soviet republic of Azerbaijan.

Freight trains carrying food and fuel to Armenia have been halted in Azerbaijan, the major highways into Armenia are blocked by armed gangs, and military airlifts have been able to bring in only limited supplies.

In a power play unprecedented in Soviet politics, Azerbaijan has squeezed Armenia hard in an effort to force it to give up its demand that the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, an enclave of Armenian Christians in Muslim Azerbaijan, be ceded to it.

“They said that nothing would pass, and virtually nothing did,” Shchors B. Dartian, a member of the Armenian Communist Party leadership, said here Wednesday. “It was a tactic based ultimately on starvation, and if our people died, well, no matter to the Azerbaijanis. We know they are fanatics.”

In Yerevan, traffic dwindled to a trickle of emergency vehicles, and even most of them stood idle for a lack of gas. Factories closed one after the other as they ran out of supplies and the city rationed power to conserve fuel. Shop shelves were quickly emptied, even of matches, and they remained bare.

More than 26,400 rail cars--carrying more than 600,000 tons of goods--have been held^{RF-009} up in Azerbaijan, according to Armenian officials. About 85% of Armenia's goods pass through Azerbaijan.

For Yerevan's 1 million residents, life in the last three weeks became an endless hunt for increasingly scarce food, long walks to work when the buses stopped running and, above all, a growing realization of Armenia's embattled position in the Soviet Union.

"This is no longer just a struggle for Nagorno-Karabakh, as central as that issue is for us, but a struggle for the survival of Armenia," Dartian said in an interview. "The Azerbaijanis have their hands at our throats, and so it is becoming a fight to the death."

For Armenians, after the devastating earthquake last Dec. 7 that killed more than 25,000 of their people, the struggle with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has added to what officials call "our traumatized historical memory."

"When we feel Azerbaijan reaching out to strangle us with this blockade, it immediately brings back everything associated with the 1915 genocide against Armenians," Levon G. Ehramjenz, chief of political information at the Armenian Foreign Ministry, said. "And when we see so little help coming for us from the rest of the Soviet Union to resolve this crisis, our fear of disappearing as a people becomes all the greater."

Initial efforts by the central government to end the blockade through mediation failed. The troops guarding the convoys of trucks through Azerbaijan were fired upon and, under orders to avoid bloodshed, were forced to turn back.

Finally, President Mikhail S. Gorbachev warned both republics Monday that they had exhausted the patience of the Soviet leadership over Nagorno-Karabakh, and he gave them two days to agree to negotiate the dispute.

The first few trains, seven of them with a total of 500 cars, arrived in Armenia on ^{RE-009} Tuesday. But this was just a fraction of the 50 trains that normally arrive daily, and they brought little hope of a solution.

Most of the cars carried only construction materials, the food in the boxcars had rotted long ago and was infested with vermin, and half of the fuel cars were filled with water or were simply empty.

“These freight trains were just a cruel joke,” Yuri S. Mkhitaryan, a senior official at the Armenian State Construction Committee, said in an interview. “We are used to that from the Azerbaijanis, but this is a trick that they are playing on Mikhail Gorbachev.”

The reluctance of the central government, until now, to use its power to break the blockade and to enforce the law has left many Armenians skeptical about Gorbachev’s resolve in dealing with the country’s mounting ethnic problems. Now an acute crisis that stretches across much of the nation, these problems also involve the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Byelorussia, Moldavia and the Ukraine and Soviet Central Asia.

And the struggle that began nearly two years ago over Nagorno-Karabakh, a fertile plateau in the Caucasus Mountains, has implications for the stability of the whole Soviet Union.

“What are the principles--the rule of law or the use of force--on which this country will be run?” an Armenian deputy to the Supreme Soviet demanded this week in Moscow. “When the law is flouted by those using force, as it now is in Azerbaijan, what will our central government do? When reason and persuasion and conciliation fail, as they have done, how do we restore order?”

“And when one Soviet socialist republic imposes an economic blockade, something that is normally regarded as an act of war, against another fraternal republic, what is the

Armenians say now that they would accept presidential rule for Nagorno-Karabakh, putting it under the central government until passions are calm and a permanent solution can be found.

But Azerbaijan's Parliament voted 10 days ago to resist any such move and demanded restoration of its authority over the disputed region. The blockade had begun with a general strike called by the radical new Azerbaijan Popular Front to force the republic's leadership to take stronger stands on the Nagorno-Karabakh and other nationalist issues there.

When the strike ended, bands of militants from the Azerbaijani Popular Front maintained the blockade, and the republic's leaders appear unable to restore order.

“The knot gets tighter and tighter all the time,” Ebrahimjan of the Armenian Foreign Ministry said, “and it is very hard to say how it can be untied or even cut through.”

Arkady Volsky, the central government's special representative for Nagorno-Karabakh, said in Moscow last week that he can see no solution, that negotiations broke down long ago and that not a single agreement reached in earlier talks had ever been kept.

The situation in Nagorno-Karabakh has been critical so long that the term has lost its meaning there, Volsky said. It has been under blockade for 18 months, it has virtually severed all its ties with Azerbaijan and it operates under effective martial law.

“Slowness in untying the Karabakh knot and the escalation of tensions in relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan have created a situation that is close to critical,” Volsky said in a television interview. “And there is no talk of compromise.”

The blockade of Armenia had eased enough Wednesday so that trucks bringing food from the countryside were able to sell meat, fruit and vegetables along the road.

Long lines quickly formed at the city’s few gas stations as drivers waited for hours to fill their tanks with gasoline, brought around Azerbaijan through Georgia, another Soviet republic.

“The harvest saved us,” one Yerevan newspaper editor said, explaining how the city’s residents have survived the blockade. “Agriculture remains strong, but there were problems getting the food from the fields into the towns and even in harvesting it. In Yerevan, we have eaten through virtually all our reserves. In our family, we are on our last jar of jam.”

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