

The victorious push by Armenian troops through the province of Kelbajar has forced thousands of Azerbaijanis to flee. Women and children tried to board helicopters in Kelbajar on Monday. About 39,000 people fleeing the fighting have passed through refugee centers.

## Attacks in Caucasus Bring New Tide of Refugees

Special to The New York Times

AT THE MUROV PASS, Azerbaijan, April 6 — They looked like black dots on the snowfields, descending the north slope of the 9,000-foot mountain pass, — three figures, trudging toward refuge in their own land.

Reaching the track that serves as a sort of logging road, the three turned out to be five — an exhausted man in his early 30's and two women in their 20's carrying infant children. All were snow-burned and in shock after a six-day trek through forests and mountains from Bashiobel in the province of Kelbajar.

Here in the southern Caucasus, Armenian forces conquered the province in the Nagorno-Karabakh region over the weekend, forcing thousands to flee and creating a refugee crisis of huge proportions.

### A Five-Year War

Nagorno-Karabakh, under the rule of Azerbaijan but populated mostly by ethnic Armenians, has been the prize in a five-year undeclared war between Armenian separatists and Azerbaijanis that has taken about 3,000 lives.

When Kelbajar fell to Armenian troops, it gave them control of a swath of land stitching Karabakh to neighboring Armenia from the north to the

south. The first link, at Lachin, was opened last year and used to get troops and supplies into Nagorno-Karabakh.

During the fighting, Azerbaijan has imposed an economic blockade on Armenia. Armenia's sole supply of natural gas was interrupted over the winter when a crucial gas pipeline was ruptured by an explosion in neighboring Georgia. Armenians were left with no heat and limited electricity and relied on foreign aid to survive the crisis. Armenia said the explosion was the work of Azerbaijani guerrillas.

### Thousands Still Missing

About 39,000 Azerbaijanis fleeing the weekend fighting have passed through refugee centers, leaving about 5,000 unaccounted for, according to local officials and 15,000 missing according to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

"When we left we were about 30 people, but we got split up during the journey and now we don't know what happened to the others. Maybe they are all dead," said Settar Tagiyev, the man in the group of five.

The Tagiyev band was probably among the last Azeri refugees to make it over the main, eastern pass to a refugee collection center at Khanlar.



Nagorno-Karabakh has long been the prize in the undeclared Armenian-Azerbaijani war.

More than 30,000 men, women and children driven from their homes over the past week have passed through the center. A center in Yevlak has processed some 3,000 others, brought out by helicopters late last week, while another center at Dashkesen has processed around 6,000.

"Our information suggests that there may be 2,000 to 3,000 left behind on the far side of the Dashkesen Pass," said a representative of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees involved in the relief efforts. "We fear a very high casualty rate if they are not immediately evacuated, because those that remain are the most vulnerable groups — mainly the old, women and children. Even young men are coming across exhausted and in thermal shock."

Numerous cases of severe frostbite and more than 40 deaths have been reported among those who managed to make it across the pass. The number of those who perished and were left behind is unknown.

In order to save those stranded, the refugee commission is now trying to secure safe passage for a corridor to the snowbound southern slope of the mountain to evacuate refugees by helicopter. But prospects look bleak. Four Azerbaijan Army helicopters ferrying refugees or wounded crashed in the past week, the most recent on Sunday, when an MI-8 helicopter hit by Armenian fire on the south slope slammed into a cliffside on the north slope. The three crew members were killed and nine people were wounded. Another helicopter bound to pick up refugees trapped behind the Armenian lines farther to the west was obliged to turn back after coming under fire.

### Armenia Denies Role

A greater obstacle to the rescue effort, however, is political: Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the Government in the Armenian capital of Yerevan continues to insist that its soldiers were never involved in the conquest of Kelbajar in the first place, and that any cease-fire to evacuate refugees should be negotiated with the government of the self-styled "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh," with which Baku refuses to negotiate.

Further, Yerevan said that the Karabakh Armenians were only reacting to an Azerbaijani offensive from Kelbajar and opened a second corridor to Armenia by coincidence.

Not only the Azerbaijan Government but numbers of eyewitnesses to the fall of Kelbajar point out that the assault on Kelbajar was mounted from Armenia itself, and that the new, northern corridor to Karabakh is over 100 kilometers wide, and represents a de facto annexation of the entire Kelbajar region.

## U.S. Rebukes Armenia on New Drive in Caucasus

By DAVID BINDER

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 6 — The United States sharply rebuked Armenia today for seizing territory in the northwest of neighboring Azerbaijan in an offensive that began 11 days ago.

In a statement by Secretary of State Warren Christopher, the Administration called on the Yerevan Government to withdraw its forces immediately, saying "the United States Government condemns this offensive" and noting that a letter of protest had been delivered on Monday to the Armenian President, Levon Ter-Petrosyan.

The protest marked the first time the United States publicly criticized one side in the conflict between the two Caucasus republics over ethnic enclaves.

The United States has been shipping relief supplies, including medicine, to Armenia for months to try to alleviate desperate shortages created by an

Azerbaijani blockade of rail and road links, denying it fuel, power and food. For more than a year American Armenians have been very active in promoting the Armenian cause. In Congress their supporters have submitted a resolution condemning Azerbaijan for its blockade of Armenia.

The Clinton Administration, like the Bush Administration before it, has sought to remain "an honest broker," as one official put it, participating in mediation efforts.

Negotiations involving 11 countries began last year in Minsk and have continued this year in Rome and Geneva. An Administration official said progress was being made on a cease-fire until the Armenian offensive.

In an initial reaction, Armenia's ambassador here, Rouben Shugaryan, said that while he had found the United States approach fair in the past, "I think this statement is not balanced."

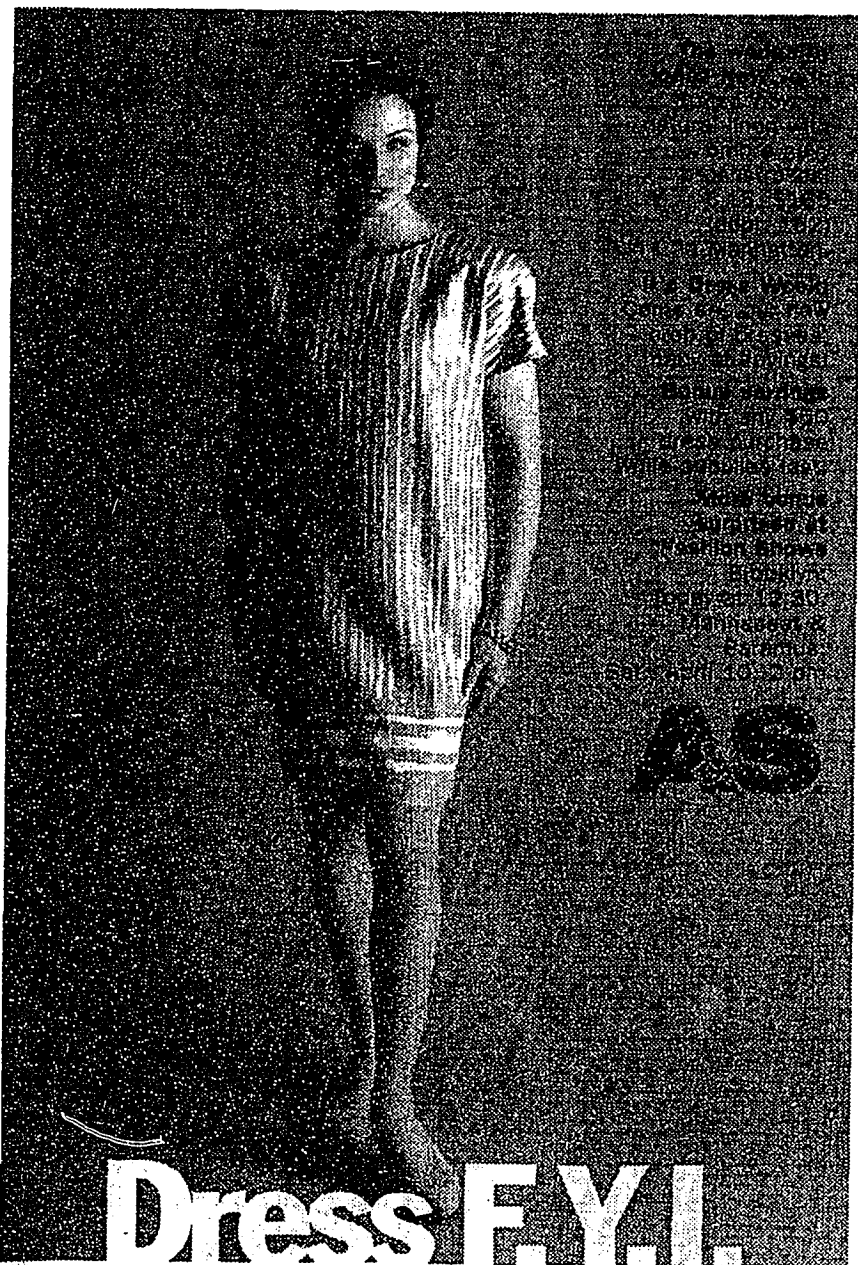
The dispute began when ethnic Armenians, complaining of persecution in

the Azerbaijan enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, asserted the right to secede and to join their territory to Armenia. Now the ethnic Armenians say they have created an independent republic in the Rhode Island-sized territory.

The statement by Mr. Christopher was carefully worded to specify an "offensive by ethnic Armenian forces," which an Administration official said could refer to armed units from inside Nagorno-Karabakh, inhabited mainly by ethnic Armenians, as well as to the army of Armenia itself.

### U.N. Demands End to Fighting

UNITED NATIONS, April 6 — The United Nations Security Council expressed "serious concern" over the renewed hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan today, especially the invasion of the Kelbajar district of the Republic of Azerbaijan by Armenian forces. It demanded an immediate end to the fighting and withdrawal from territory occupied by force.

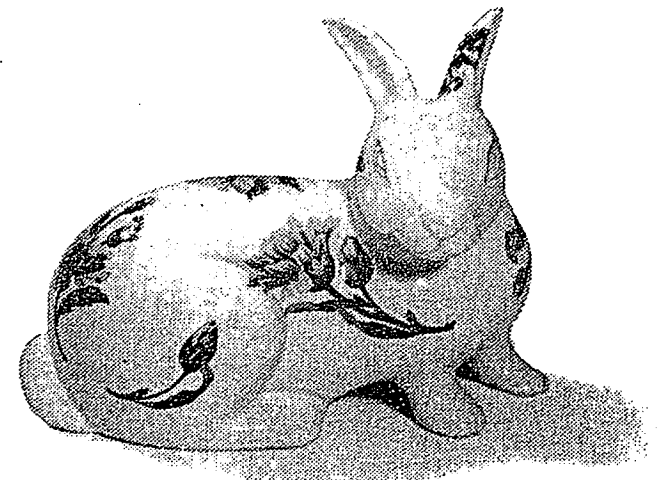


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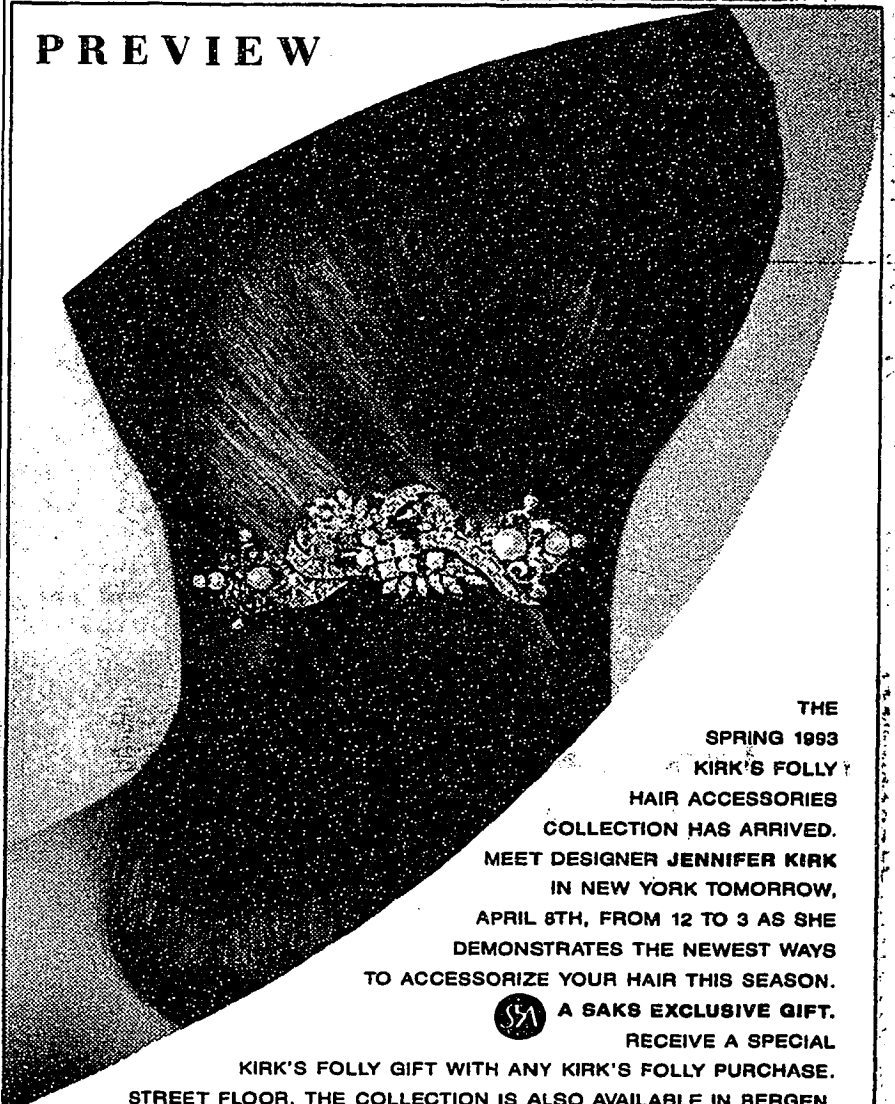
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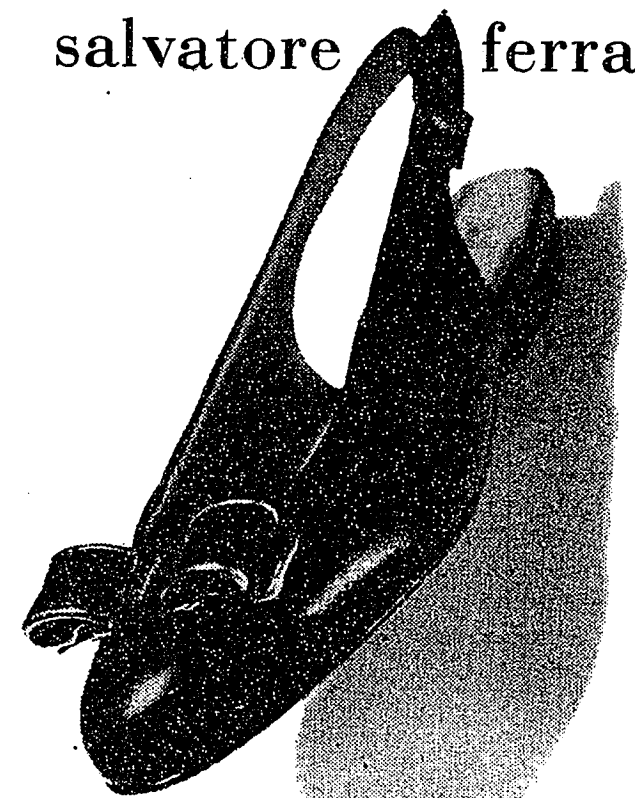
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