

TRAGEDY

Massacre in Khojaly

The blood feud between Armenians and Azerbaijanis claims 200 civilians

While the details are disputed, this much is plain: something grim and unconscionable happened in the Azerbaijani town of Khojaly two weeks ago. So far, some 200 dead Azerbaijanis, many of them mutilated, have been transported out of the town tucked inside the Armenian-dominated enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh for burial in neighboring Azerbaijan. The total number of dead—the Azerbaijanis claim 1,324 civilians were slaughtered, most of them women and children—is unknown. But the facile explanation offered by the attacking Armenians, who insist that no innocents were deliberately killed, is hardly convincing.

The assault represents an alarming escalation in the hostilities that are rapidly pushing Christian Armenia and Muslim Azerbaijan toward all-out war. Over the past four years the two republics have pressed their territorial claims to Nagorno-Karabakh, a 1,700-sq.-mi. piece of turf located within Azerbaijan's boundaries but home mainly to Armenians. Until the breakup of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan held the upper hand, owing to military support from units of the now disintegrating Seventh Army. The embattled Armenians enjoyed sympathy from many of Moscow's liberals and democrats, who disliked the collusion between Azerbaijan and Kremlin hard-liners.

Now perceptions are shifting as Azerbaijanis assume the role of underdog and Armenians appear to be the predatory wolves. Videotapes circulated by the Azerbaijanis include images of disfigured civilians, some of them scalped, others shot through the head. Armenians claim the footage is fake. They insist that they left a corridor open for civilians to flee Khojaly but that Azerbaijani soldiers led a group of 200 civilians into harm's way. The use of surface-to-air missiles, sophisticated Grad rocket batteries and armor proves that both sides are now armed with state-of-the-art weapons that were bequeathed by, sold by or stolen from Soviet units.

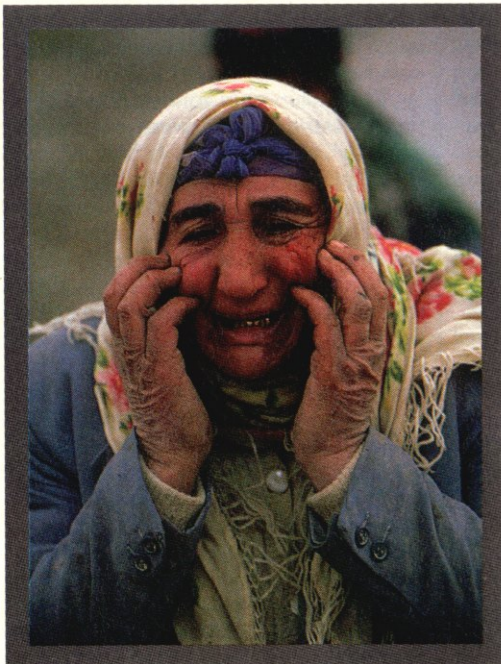
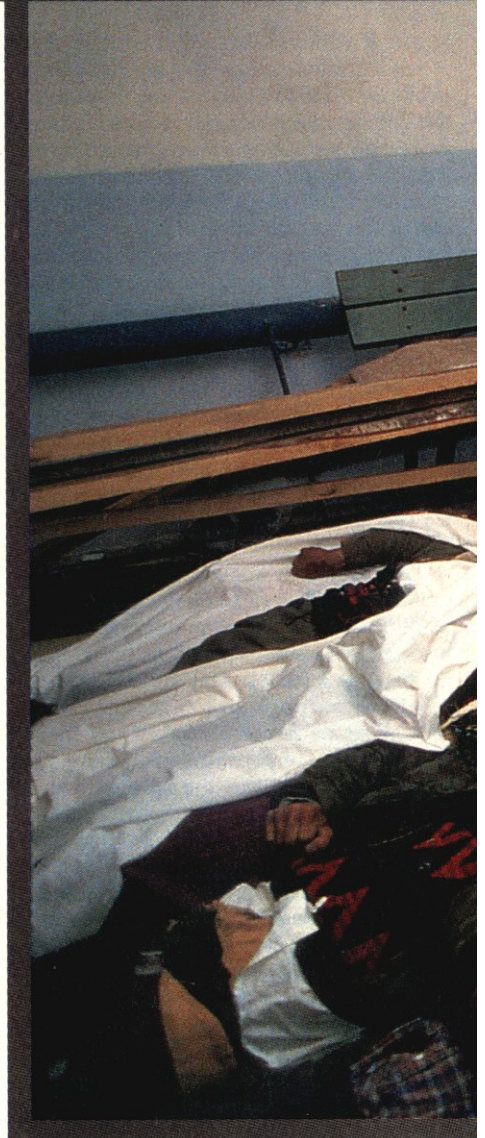
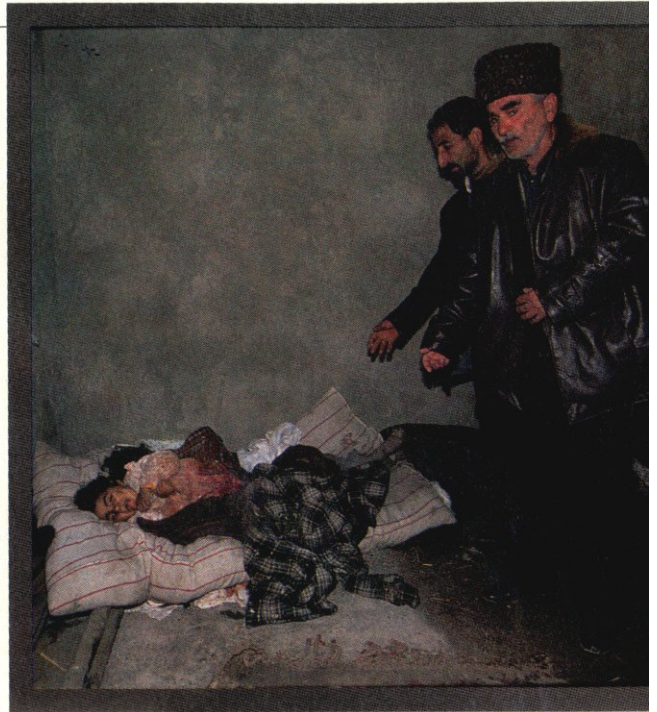
Although Nagorno-Karabakh is small, the implications of the violence are large.

Officials from other republics regard the outcome as a test for the future prospects of the patchwork Commonwealth of Independent States. Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan, warns that the clash may "create a precedent for uncontrolled development of conflicts within the C.I.S." Late last week Azerbaijani President Ayaz Mutalibov resigned under criticism for mishandling the crisis. Meanwhile, Russian President Boris Yeltsin called upon the two republics to "show political will and wisdom and start a dialogue." But with the guns sounding so loudly, it is hard to imagine how the two sides will be able to hear each other.

—By Jill Smolowe.

Reported by Yuri Zarakhovich/Moscow

A grief-stricken woman tears at her face





A gallery of horror, clockwise from top left: the bloodied bodies of two children; staring into a makeshift morgue in the Azerbaijani town of Agdam; a roomful of corpses recovered from Khojaly



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