

# Karabakh falls prey to revenge

"WHEN Armenians get killed you simply report it. When our people die you say they were 'allegedly' killed." This is an Azeri soldier speaking. He was showing Western reporters the bodies of civilian refugees in a mosque in Agdam. They were slaughtered by Armenian guerrillas when they took the town of Khojali on 25 February. "You come here and show sympathy but we know you will go away and write something different," the soldier said.

The Muslim Azeris are convinced the West favours Christian Armenia in the four-year war over the mountain enclave of Nagorny Karabakh. Armenians are equally adamant that they are misrepresented. It is a mine-field for outsiders.

Just before I arrived at the Azeri border town of Agdam on Tuesday, Armenian officials denied that civilian refugees had been murdered after the fight for Khojali. They implied the Azeris were not only exaggerating the death toll by claiming more than 1,000 killed but were staging a show to make battle deaths look like a massacre. I did not know what to believe.

The night I got to Agdam I was taken to the mosque where the bodies were. They were hideously mutilated, deliberately said the Azeris. Why only four? I asked the soldier. Because relatives had already buried scores of others. Hundreds more corpses were still lying in the mountains, he said. The four bodies had not been claimed, perhaps because their relatives also died.

Each day brings more evidence that innocent people are being

## Helen Womack confronts the evidence of a massacre on her arrival in Agdam

killed; they are not just caught in the crossfire. I have little doubt that on this occasion, two weeks ago, the Azeris were the victims of Armenian brutality. In the past it has been the other way round. So much hatred has accumulated on both sides that the future seems to hold only endless revenge and counter-revenge.

Early on Wednesday a large crowd gathered outside Agdam's mosque; some people were survivors from Khojali, some were relatives, desperate because they said Armenians were shooting at Azeris trying to recover the dead from the hills. The chief of police, Colonel Rashid Mamedov, said only about 500 Khojali residents reached Agdam safely.

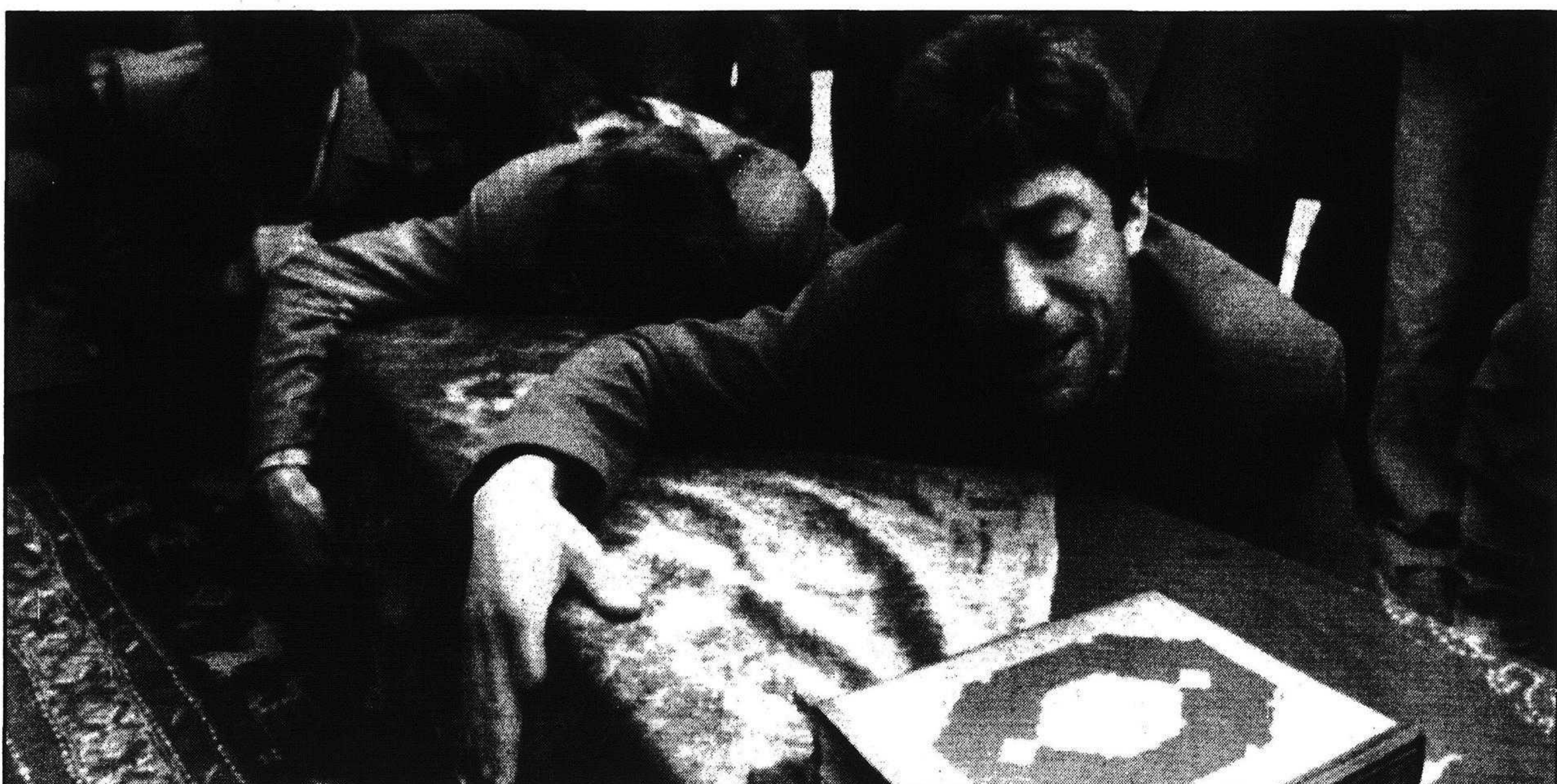
The accounts of the slaughter were consistent; these were simple people. They described how the Armenians surprised them with the heaviest attack on the town so far, how they realised they could not defend themselves and fled at about midnight into the surrounding woods, how a column of refugees tried to walk down the Askeran Gap to Agdam and how in the small hours of the morning Armenian fighters trapped them there and fired indiscriminately on women, chil-

dren and old men. Many of those who did not die by the bullet froze to death on the mountainsides.

Ramiz Nasiru, a shoemaker who believes his wife and two children were captured alive, said he saw Russians from the former Soviet army supporting the Armenians with armoured personnel carriers. Other survivors spoke of Russian involvement.

Last year the Armenians accused Soviet Interior Ministry troops of joining Azeri raids on their villages. At that point it seemed as if Mikhail Gorbachev had come down on the side of Azerbaijan in the fight for the disputed enclave. The Commonwealth of Independent States, which is now withdrawing its remaining forces from Nagorny Karabakh, says it was always neutral in the conflict. I think it is possible that some Russian officers, facing a future of uncertainty back home, are helping fellow Christian Armenians as mercenaries.

The crowd outside the mosque was swelled by hundreds of people from all over Azerbaijan who had come to arrange funerals for their relatives. They were distraught because the bodies had still not been retrieved. Agdam's



Last prayer: Chingiz Iskanderov weeps with his family over the coffin of his brother, whose body is one of 200 said to have been recovered after Armenians drove Azeris from Khojali

judge, Adil Gasimov, said about 200 bodies had been brought down from the mountains but he believed as many as 1,500 bodies were still up there. A further 600 people from Khojali might be held captive by the Armenians.

At Agdam railway station, a passenger train was turned into a makeshift clinic after the town's hospital was damaged by artillery fire in an earlier battle with Armenians. Since the assault on

Khojali, 256 patients had passed through the train's doors. Nubar Duniyalieva, 43, was still there. She described how she had crawled to the safety of Azeri lines with a bullet in her back. Two of her children had escaped with her, two were missing. Sayale Zenalova, 60, lifted her skirt to show a bullet wound in her thigh. Her daughter Valide was with her, also wounded in the leg. Sayale said two of her five sons

had been shot dead before her eyes, the others were missing.

The doctor on the train, Eldar Sirazhev, said a terrible tragedy had taken place but the world was silent. "The West has always supported the Armenian side because they have a large, eloquent diaspora," he declared.

Agasy Babaoglu, a journalist and one of the few Azeris I met who was prepared to admit Armenians were suffering too, hoped

that "with 'imperialist' Soviet forces out of the way and a democratically elected government in Baku, Azeri and Armenian leaders might be able to compromise over Nagorny Karabakh. But it is more likely that a new government in Azerbaijan will press on with the fight for Nagorny Karabakh which Azeris say was theirs for centuries and which Armenians say they lost as a result of boundary changes made by Lenin.

"We will forgive the Armenians only when they get out of Karabakh," said Jagub Rzaev, the grey-bearded commander of the autonomous defence unit "Hawks of Karabakh". And indeed yesterday it seemed that the Azeris were already taking their revenge for what happened at Khojali. Armenia said 200 of its fighters had been killed in a new thrust by the enemy into the disputed enclave.

# Bosnia pins hopes on UN

"IT'S 100 per cent certain there'll be war. So what?" That was the casually expressed view of one of the patrons of the Star restaurant, a smoke-filled room in Bosansko Grahovo, western Bosnia, where a few dozen men sat drinking and playing cards. The restaurant — not a glamorous venue — is one of the main meeting places in this run-down Serbian-majority town.

Not all the speaker's companions were so pessimistic about the possibility of renewed conflict in what used to be Yugoslavia. But, in this ethnic Serbian stronghold they were united on one point: they refused to accept the possibility that their town may one day be part of an independent Bosnia. Several said they would fight to prevent such an outcome. Others were less keen on the fighting, but they too insisted that they must stay "in Yugoslavia".

Few in Grahovo seemed to recognise the anachronism of that phrase. For not only Slovenia and Croatia to the west have declared independence — Bosnia too has broken away from Yugoslavia. Last weekend, in a republic-wide referendum on the question, 63 per cent of those eligible to vote were in favour of an independent, undivided Bosnia, thus confirming an earlier parliamentary decision. The Muslims and Croats — who together form a majority of the population — voted in favour; Serbs called for a boycott of the referendum (and as a result, the yes votes were only a few decimal points short of 100 per cent of all votes cast).

In Grahovo, the Serbs did not just stage a boycott — they refused to let the referendum take place. The inhabitants of Grahovo and of Titov Drvar, another Serbian majority town, thus defiantly refused to acknowledge the changes already taking place. The Serbs say that if Bosnia does not remain in Yugoslavia, then it should be carved up between the different ethnic groups. They refuse to accept the concept proposed by the Muslim leadership of Bosnia, and backed by the Bosnian Croats, of "equal rights for all citizens".

While the Serbs in Grahovo do not want to be part of a break-away Bosnia, the non-Serb Bosnians refuse to stay behind. They say that though they were happy to stay in the old Yugoslavia, where Bosnia's mixed identity fitted in well, they do not want to stay in the new rump Yugoslavia, which looks set to consist only of Serbia and Montenegro.

These divisions have seemed ready to explode. For several days last week, Bosnia prepared itself for a repetition — perhaps on a more horrifying scale — of the carnage that Croatia has suffered. By this weekend, the prospects of such a bloodbath appeared to have receded. Nonetheless, the question remained whether this was merely a temporary respite, or a turning point.

## Steve Crawshaw in Bosansko Grahovo looks at the chances of averting a war

At the beginning of the week, the scenario familiar from Croatia last year was beginning to repeat itself as Serbs, protesting they were under threat from the pro-independence authorities, threw up barricades around their communities; a swirling mass of rumour and counter-rumour led to a dramatic increase in tension.

Several people died in the early part of the week. It was grimly similar to the first clashes in eastern and southern Croatia in Spring 1991, when it was clear to all except the blindfolded politicians ("We will not permit Yugoslavia to fall apart," declared George Bush) that an extraordinarily bloody war was on its way.

In Bosnia, however things may yet turn out differently. In the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo, Muslims, Croats and Serbs joined together at a peace rally on Thursday to protest against the danger of war. It was notable that this was a joint rally, *against* the war. Throughout the first half of 1991, Serbs and Croats only stoked the fires of mutual hatred. The war in Croatia undoubtedly

helped to concentrate the minds of those in Bosnia: the destruction of recent months has made it clear to all that such a conflict can benefit neither side.

Nonetheless, the dangers remain real, especially in the countryside. In the mixed city of Travnik, west of Sarajevo — mostly Muslim and Croat, with some Serbs — Asim Fazlic, the police chief, said that he was worried that the tensions could still explode. Several hundred soldiers have been brought into the area. But Mr Fazlic believed the effect of their presence, though supported by the Serbs, would be to heighten tension.

Soon, in Croatia at least, it will be the Yugoslav army's turn to withdraw. The first officers from the UN peace-keeping forces arrive in Yugoslavia this week. The main deployment of UN troops is due to start by the middle of the month. Cyrus Vance, the UN special envoy, insisted in Sarajevo last week that the clashes in Bosnia would not delay that deployment. The UN forces are to have their headquarters in Sarajevo, with the logistics co-ordinated in Banja Luka, in the north of the republic. Their presence is welcomed by the Bosnian leadership.

In the areas where the UN forces are due, there is optimism that, for now at least, they can stop the war spreading. Everybody recognises, however, that the UN forces can do little to solve the underlying problems.

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