

REFUGEES ON MOVE IN AZERBAIJAN WAR

Tens of Thousands Fleeing as
Armenians Gain in Fight
Over Disputed Region

Special to The New York Times

IMISHLI, Azerbaijan — On a 90-mile stretch of highway in southwestern Azerbaijan, tens of thousands of people are on the move, fleeing as the war with Armenians over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh spills ever deeper into Azerbaijan. The new wave brings the total number of displaced people in this former Soviet republic to almost one million — more than 10 percent of the population.

Beat-up cars, piled high with rugs, pots and pans, clunk down the road on wheels with no rubber on the rims. Trucks overloaded with mattresses and bed frames try to pass tractors pulling wagons built to carry tons of cotton, but now filled with clothes, children and ducks. Heavy construction vehicles like cranes and road graders carry refrigerators and stoves.

The rear is brought up by men riding donkeys or leading mule-drawn carts, while on the shoulder of the road, bare-foot shepherds dodge in and out of the traffic to keep sheep, cows and oxen out of harm's way.

Village Attacked by Armor

"What did we do to deserve this?" said a 55-year-old Azerbaijani shepherd named Bakish Kerimov. He said an armored column of two tanks and an armored personnel carrier backed by scores of Armenian soldiers from Nagorno-Karabakh — an Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan — attacked his village in Gubatli province while a cease-fire was supposed to be in effect.

"We had little before, but now we have nothing but the animals we got out and the clothes on our backs," he said.

Unlike Mr. Kerimov, who did not leave his village until the day it was



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Outside the town of Imishli, an angry crowd told of how they were forced from their homes.

attacked, most of the new refugees in Azerbaijan decided to evacuate early because they had little faith in the army's ability to defend them. Others were told to clear out by army units that were planning to retreat or desert.

"Typically the locals would try and stay about 15 miles from their last camp, always hoping that the next day they might return," said Mahmoud al-Said, the representative in Azerbaijan of the United Nations Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

Such hopes were dashed last month when Armenian forces from Nagorno-Karabakh seized the cities of Fizuli and Jibrail outside the enclave and then pushed west to Gubatli.

A panicked exodus ensued as the refugees already in the region were joined by tens of thousands of others who had remained in their homes until then, resulting in the chaotic caravan heading east toward safety.

The Government in Baku, fearful that a sudden crush of refugees in the capital would worsen political tensions, has set up roadblocks up to 100 miles away from the capital, and tried to drive the refugees back.

This has resulted in the creation of hundreds of camps set up in cotton fields just outside the battle zone.

In one such settlement, along a miasmic, brown irrigation canal just west of Imishli, an angry crowd of around 300 people tried to tell a Western reporter what had happened to them.

Chinese Dissident Seen By Members of Family

BEIJING, Thursday, Sept. 16 (AP) — Nearly two days after releasing its best known dissident from prison in a public-relations gesture, Chinese authorities finally allowed him to meet family members today and hand over a note saying he was resting.

"I will return to the city within a few days and meet with all my friends," Wei Jingsheng said in the note, which relatives released to reporters today. "Thank you all for your concern."

The police took Mr. Wei's sister and brother, Wei Lingling and Wei Xiaotao, to see the dissident late Wednesday night at a guesthouse in a Beijing suburb. "He was very happy," Wei Lingling said, adding that they mostly discussed family matters.

It was the first contact the family was allowed with the dissident since authorities announced Tuesday morning that he was being released on parole 6 months before the end of a 15-year prison term. The action came 10 days before the International Olympic Committee is due to decide the venue for the 2000 Olympic Games.

The belated family reunion — minus Mr. Wei's father — did not entirely clear up the puzzle of just how much freedom Mr. Wei really has. Wei Lingling said her brother was willing to stay at the guesthouse for several days in order to rest, collect his thoughts and begin making arrangements for a place to live.

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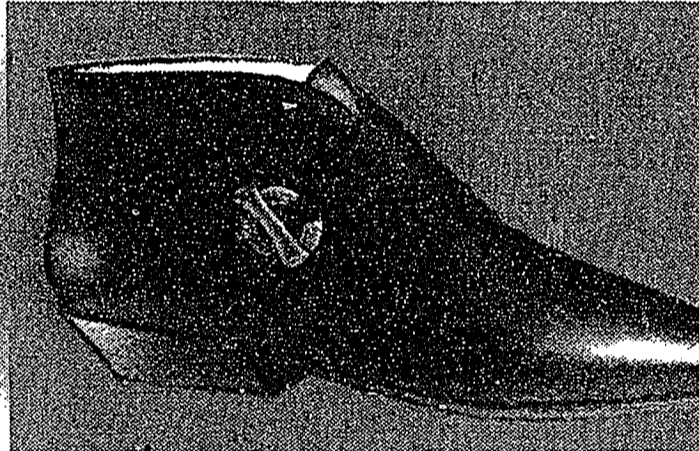
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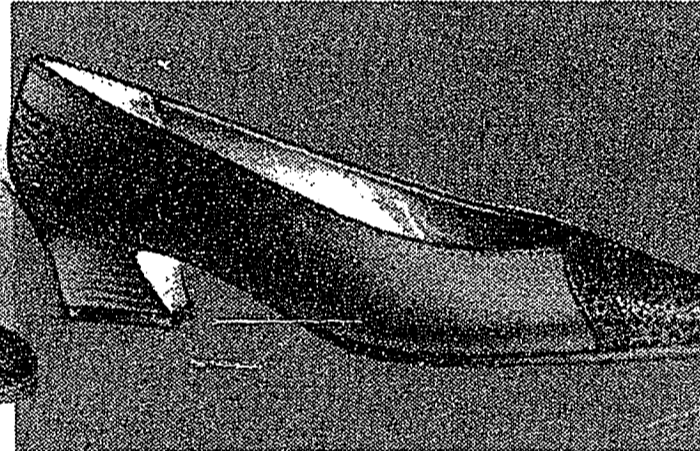
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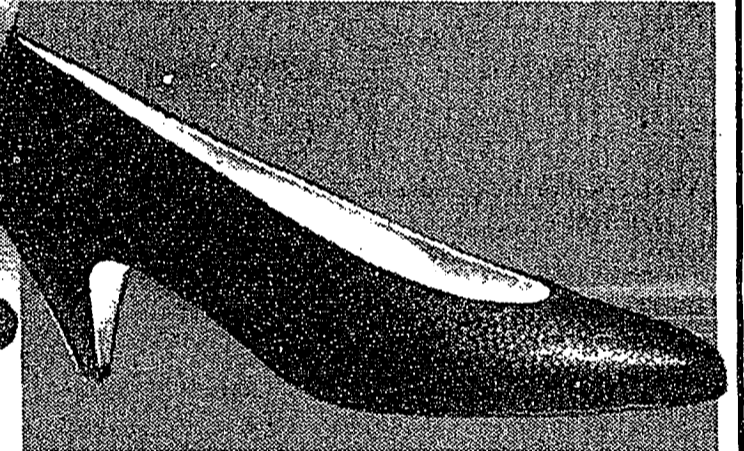
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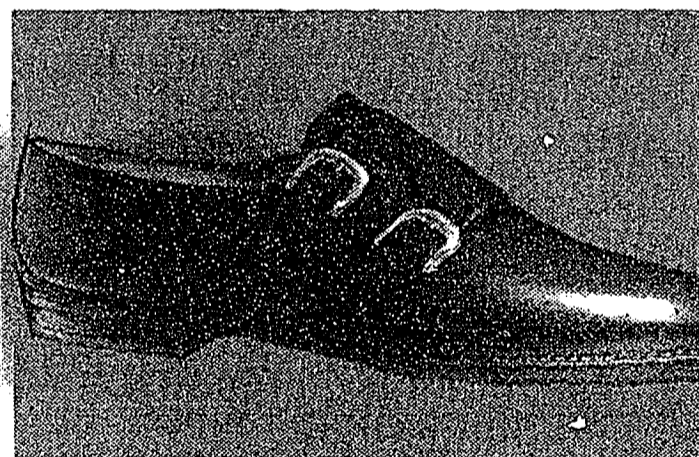
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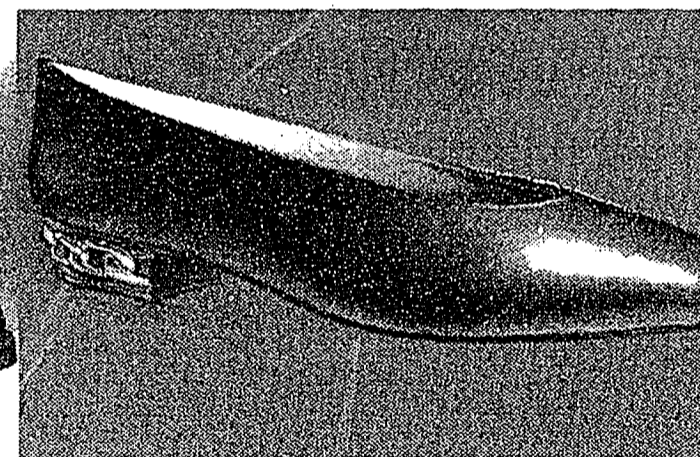
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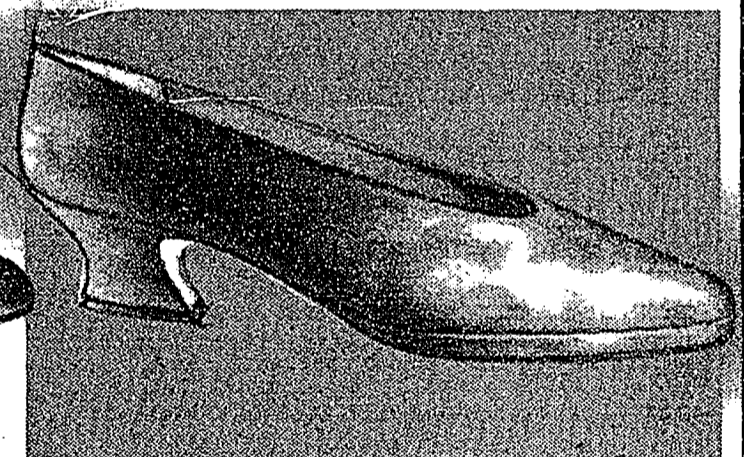
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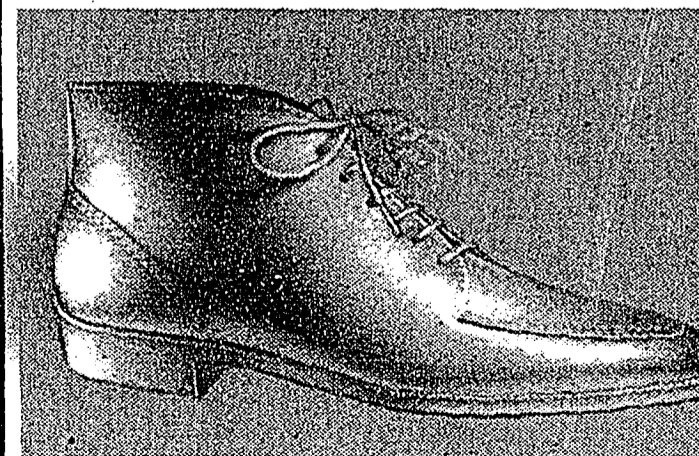
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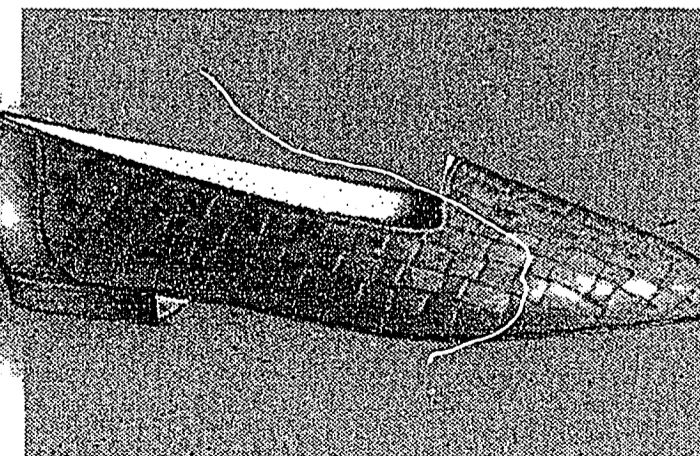
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