

# Poor pickings for Armenian looters among the burnt-out buildings of fallen Azeri town

**Suzanne Goldenberg** in Agdam reports on the desolation wreaked by the war in Nagorno-Karabakh

**O**NCE a town of 50,000 and the most important staging post in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Agdam is now a place of charred buildings and deserted streets.

The only signs of life are ripening fruit trees and bundled-up old women who move like wraiths through the ruins. From abandoned gardens they pick persimmon which will be sent to Armenian forces on the front line nearby.

Clutching their laden sacks the women wait by the roadside for the lorries that will take them back to the enclave's capital, Stepanakert. Dozens of labels from the defunct local wine factory lie at their feet on the dusty road.

Although Armenian civilians have ventured into Agdam since its capture in late July, they say they feel uneasy amid the desolation caused by their armies. "This is an Azerbaijani town," said one old man, wheeling a trolley of pomegranates out of town. "Why should we want to live here?"

Some of the first looters who

arrived in Agdam said they found burned corpses in the wreckage. Others are quick to load up with whatever they can salvage before they leave.

But despite the Karabakh government's claims that it is punishing looters, there is only one desultory checkpoint outside the town.

Although there is some evidence of the heavy shelling that accompanied Agdam's fall, the burnt-out buildings are testimony to the town's sacking after its capture. In the centre, there is hardly a building left intact, just blackened empty husks.

Agdam was the most strategic Azeri town to fall as the Armenian forces punched their way out of the enclave to occupy a huge swath of Azerbaijan. Its capture was followed by the seizure in August of Jebrail and Fizuli to the south, which cut off tens of thousands of civilians from Azerbaijan, forcing them to flee towards Iran a few miles away.

The few Western aid agency officials to have visited these areas have spoken of deliberate

destruction through fires and looting.

Officials in Nagorno-Karabakh have not said so outright, but it seems clear that the land seized from Azerbaijan to the west, east and south-west of the enclave will act as a buffer zone until the war is over.

"We consider this our front line. We will keep the occupied territories as a no-man's land. The army is busy terminating strongholds as military bases," Manvil Sarkissian, the Nagorno-Karabakh ambassador to Armenia, said.

The Karabakh advance into Azerbaijan was halted by a ceasefire in early September, but the fighting to the south resumed a few days ago. A second exodus is in progress through a corridor carved out of the Zangelan region — destroying any hope of the ceasefire being extended when it expires next week.

Western aid agencies are warning of a new humanitarian disaster in Azerbaijan.

The Karabakh Armenians in Stepanakert have been buoyed by the military successes. They

are relishing a rare period of peace since the war began in 1988. A besieged city 16 months ago, it is now easily reached from the Armenian capital Yerevan by coach and taxi.

However, the Karabakh authorities are angry at the international condemnation of their offensive and the focus on Azeri refugees. Last week they declared a state of emergency in the enclave, restricting the movements of all outsiders.

Even Armenian journalists are barred from battle zones and need entry and exit visas for Karabakh.

But with the Azeri forces so savagely defeated, the Karabakh authorities feel confident enough to begin resettling refugees in three regions of the enclave. Mardakert in the north — which changed hands several times before the Azeris were forced out in June — is the scene of the most ambitious resettlement.

Most people are eager to go back, although electricity has yet to be restored and the villages are as devastated as Agdam.

"This is my land. I cannot live anywhere else in the world," Asdghig Asarian said. She and her three children fled from the area to Yerevan in July 1992. They eked out a liv-



Government construction workers from all over Armenia have been working in Zardakhaj and six other villages for the past two months, trying to guarantee each family one habitable room before winter.

The authorities in Karabakh and Armenia are anxious that people return home, to stop the drain on finances and to bolster the recent military victories.

But some observers in Yerevan are worried. They say the latest Karabakh attacks are born of desperation. With negotiations on Karabakh's future blocked at the conference on security and co-operation in Europe, Armenian troops are anxious to force the president of Azerbaijan, Geidar Aliyev, to negotiate by inflicting defeat after defeat.

The Armenian side is trying to extract a pledge from Mr Aliyev to gradually lift a two-year blockade of Armenia and Karabakh in return for a staged retreat from Azerbaijan.

But time is on Mr Aliyev's side. Despite the horrific Azeri losses, winter is approaching. Economic life in Armenia is already near standstill and it is unclear how many more sacrifices people are prepared to make on behalf of their brethren in Karabakh.

ing on International Red Cross food and clothing handouts and a payment from the Armenian government of 1,000 roubles (less than \$5).

Her husband lost the use of his right hand in the fighting but they were among the first to return to Zardakhaj village this summer. "There was nothing left, only the walls of my home," she said. "But life is simpler here; we can hope to survive."