



# ANALYSIS

KHOJALY GENOCIDE

BRIEF OVERVIEW IN Q & A

The first public debate between Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan was held on the sideline of the Munich Security Conference on 15 February 2020. This debate manifested the continued dispute over many historical issues, including recent events, such as the well documented tragedy in the town of Khojaly in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan.

Over the night, from 25 to 26 February 1992, Armenian armed forces with the help of infantry guards from regiment № 366 of the former USSR implemented the seizure of Khojaly, killed hundreds of innocent civilians, while committing atrocities against them. As a result of the massacre, 613 persons were murdered, including 106 women, 83 small children, and 70 elderly persons and 1,275 peaceful inhabitants were taken hostage. The Human Rights Watch (HRW) in its relevant report described the event in Khojaly as **“the largest massacre to date in the conflict.”**

During the debate in Munich Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan repeated a cliché of Armenian nationalist narrative that Azerbaijanis themselves committed the massacre, referring to alleged statement of former president of Azerbaijan Ayaz Mutalibov. The following brief analysis sheds light on this and other allegations with regard to Khojaly tragedy.

The Khojaly genocide was not an accidental outbreak of violence in the course of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, initiated by Armenian nationalists in 1988 to annex the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan (NK), but rather a deliberate act of mass murder, with excessive use of force aimed at intimidating the Azerbaijani population of Nagorno-Karabakh. The former president of the Republic of Armenia Serzh Sarkissian (the then chair of NK region Self-Defense Forces Committee), quoted by British author and expert Thomas de Waal, admits to the reason behind Khojaly massacre: *“Before Khojaly, Azerbaijanis thought that they were joking with us, they thought that the Armenians were people who could not raise their hand against the civilian population. We were able to break that stereotype. And that’s what happened.”*<sup>1</sup>

American journalist Thomas Goltz wrote in his book *“Azerbaijan Diary”*: *“...bodies, stiffened by rigor mortis seemed to speak of execution: arms were thrown up...a number of heads lacked hair, as if the corpses had been scalped”.*<sup>2</sup>

BBC reporter witnessed, *“He saw more than 100 bodies of Azerbaijani men, women and children as well as a baby who are shot dead from their heads from a very short distance”*. Le Monde stressed, *“The foreign journalist in Aghdam saw*

<sup>1</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, NYU Press, 2003, pp. 172-173.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-rich, War-torn, Post-Soviet Republic*, M.E. Sharpe, 1998, p.123.

*the women and three scalped children with the pulled off nails among the killed people. This is not "Azerbaijani propaganda", but reality".*

Although Armenian officials denied their responsibility for the crimes committed during the conflict, including Khojaly massacre, their responsibility is documented by numerous independent sources and eyewitnesses of this tragedy.

### **Armenian Allegations**

The Armenian government, media and some diaspora organizations blame the events in Khojaly on Azerbaijanis themselves. According to the Armenian version, the Khojaly event was conspired by Azerbaijani opposition, namely the Popular Front, and implemented by Azerbaijani armed groups controlled by the Popular Front. To prove this version of the event the Armenian side present several "evidences" – all are forged.

#### **Allegation # 1:**

The Armenian side argues that the killings occurred because of wartime military operations, and were in part caused by the prevention of the evacuation of the town's inhabitants by Azerbaijani forces.

#### **Answer:**

In response to such allegations the executive director of Human Rights Watch, Holly Cartner, stated in her letter: *"we place direct responsibility for the civilian deaths with Karabakh Armenian forces. Indeed, neither our report nor that of Memorial includes any evidence to support the argument that Azerbaijani forces obstructed the flight of, or fired on Azeri civilians."*<sup>3</sup>

#### **Allegation # 2**

Armenians argue that the so-called armed forces of Nagorno-Karabakh left a "humanitarian corridor" so as civilians would escape from Khojaly.

#### **Answer:**

The report of Memorial, a Moscow-based human rights group, on the massive violations of human rights committed during the massacre of Khojaly, says of the civilians fleeing the town: *"Fell into ambushes set by the Armenians and came under fire. Some of them nonetheless managed to get into Agdam [city nearby Khojaly]; others, mostly women and children, froze to death while lost in the mountains; others still, according to testimony from those who reached Agdam, were taken prisoner..."*<sup>4</sup>

#### **Allegation # 3**

The Armenian side points out that the attack on Khojaly was necessary action due to the strategic location of the town, and was done in the course of war.

#### **Answer:**

HRW and Memorial stated in their reports that the mass killing of civilians in Khojaly could not be justified under any circumstances and that action of Armenian militants were in gross violation of a number of basic international human

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<sup>3</sup> Letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia from the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch dated March 24, 1997, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/1997/03/24/azerba16933.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Report of Memorial Human Rights Center (In Russian), <http://www.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/karabah/Hojaly/>

rights conventions. HRW noted that *“the attacking party [i.e., Karabakh Armenian forces] is still obliged to take precautionary measures to avoid or minimize civilian casualties. In particular, the party must suspend an attack if it becomes apparent that the attack may be expected to cause civilian casualties that are excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.”*<sup>5</sup>

#### **Allegation # 4**

Armenians say that Khojaly was solely the result of political intrigue and a struggle for power in Azerbaijan. They refer to then president of Azerbaijan Ayaz Mutalibov who allegedly confessed that Khojaly was designed by opposition forces within Azerbaijan.

#### **Answer:**

Ayaz Mutalibov in an interview to Regnum News Agency said that: *“Any reference to me stating that the Popular Front facilitated to the fall of Khojaly is blatant lie. I said only that the Popular Front took advantage of the situation to come to power.”*<sup>6</sup>

#### **AIR Center**

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<sup>5</sup> Letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia from the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch dated March 24, 1997, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/1997/03/24/azerba16933.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Interview of Ayaz Mutalibov to Regnum News Agency, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/223355.html>