



SAFERWORLD

PREVENTING VIOLENT CONFLICT. BUILDING SAFER LIVES



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After the 2014 escalation: The front line between Armenia and Azerbaijan

Overview and Key Outcomes

OVER THE LAST TWO DECADES, the standoff between Armenians and Azerbaijanis has often been characterised as 'no war, no peace' as there has been little progress on resolving the Nagorny Karabakh (NK) conflict. The unresolved conflict continues to pose ongoing and evolving challenges on the ground, including insecurity, long-term displacement, and ingrained mistrust.

In 2014, however, the situation escalated towards 'more war and less peace', as both Azerbaijani and Armenian villagers describe it. The year was marked by increased fighting, more human loss and damage, and several major security incidents.

One group particularly hit hard by this escalation are ordinary Azerbaijanis and Armenians living on either side of the border. Communities on both sides report loss and injury and a great increase of worry and fear. Parents are worried about their children's safety. The fighting has made it hard to continue farming, choking the main source of income for most households.

In response, both sides should explore ways of de-escalating the conflict at a local level, so that communities are not caught up in spirals of escalation. Both sides may benefit from basic measures that would address key community concerns, such as the safety of children attending kindergartens and school, or making arrangements that make it possible to collect harvests without being shot at. Communities need help in coping with the prospect of ongoing military action, for example with more firefighting equipment as well as more medical support. People stressed that they want to be actively involved and that authorities and international organisations should work closely with local people, to ensure measures target their needs.

The findings and recommendations in this policy brief and the accompanying report were drawn from consultations and interviews conducted in late 2014 among people directly affected by the conflict, in ten Azerbaijani communities located close to the border with Armenia, in the districts of Gazakh, Tovuz and Agstafa, and in nine communities in the Tavush region on the Armenian side of the border. This report thus focused on the northern regions of Azerbaijan and Armenia, and did not specifically focus on communities close to the Line of Contact around Nagorny Karabakh.

Armenia-Azerbaijan: Protect Civilians Project

This study was made possible by the support of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. It is part of Saferworld's project, jointly implemented with Civil Society Institute (Yerevan) and Society for Humanitarian Research (Baku), which aims to study and publicising the security concerns of the communities living near Armenian-Azerbaijani frontlines and add their voice to security provision and peacebuilding processes.



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This briefing provides broad recommendations to various stakeholders. More detailed background information and recommendations can be found in the main report, *Towards a secure future: community voices in border areas of Armenia and Azerbaijan*.

Findings and Recommendations

Importance of de-escalating locally

All sides should work to prevent new incidents that can contribute to future escalation.

The escalation of hostilities in 2014 along the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan highlighted familiar but potentially dangerous patterns of escalation. If unchecked, these patterns could potentially drag Armenia and Azerbaijan into a more intensified resumption of hostilities, even if this outcome is not initially fully intended by either side.

"They shoot every day, there is no day without shooting."

Villagers, Nerkin Karmiraghbyur and Chinari

These dangerous patterns of escalation are discernible at a local level. Communities on both sides appear to believe that their side is primarily responding to ceasefire violations from the other side. There is a keen awareness of losses and damage suffered by one's own side. The other side is primarily seen as inflicting violence rather than as also suffering.

"At times they shell our village for five-six hours without a break."

Woman, pensioner, from Jafarli

Yet there is powerful symmetry: it appears that both sides shoot at villages of the other side, with both sides sustaining significant damage in villages over the summer of 2014, especially in August. Both sides report that some of the roads are regularly under fire and that moving vehicles are shot at. People on both sides say they are primarily worried about snipers, though also that they are being kept up at night by gunfire. People on both sides report just how hard it is to live and believe that there is a future, under these circumstances.

"Our home came under direct fire from the Azerbaijani side, it looked like another war, and I took the grandchildren and walked to a nearby village, from where our friend drove us with his car to the city."

57-year-old woman, Barekamavan

Seeing oneself as just responding to the ceasefire violations of the other side

creates a risk of unchecked escalation. The communities do receive some national attention, for example through the media reporting on increased hostilities. This means that the way the local communities perceive the conflict also affects how the broader narratives within the countries.

"The government should act more decisively to repel such Armenian attacks."

Former serviceman, Alibeyli

Recognising the pattern for what it is and awareness of its symmetry are key to avoiding a potential spiral of escalation. So far, there is limited evidence that there is strong awareness of these risks in the communities and beyond. This could, at some point, fuel rhetoric that will make it more difficult for either side to back down and de-escalate.

Yet it could also have an even more direct impact, as the planned formation of village self-defence units in Azerbaijan illustrates. Such units, also discussed in focus groups, would involve local communities even more directly in the conflict.

Residents report limited progress in the formation of such units. As the concept is still under development, Azerbaijani political and military leaders may indeed want to consider the potential risks. There is good reason why traditionally militaries have been cautious about complementing their forces with local residents who may have attachments and emotions that override strategic intent.

Part of recognising patterns of escalation is to understand the role of particular stories. Of particular concern in 2014 were several instances of Armenians crossing onto the Azerbaijani side, presumably after losing their way. Seeing a fellow villager paraded on Azerbaijani television, shortly before his death in captivity, was a searing experience for Armenians. It contributed to a sense of the inevitability of conflict.

Similarly, Azerbaijani communities have their stories of innocent victims of explosive devices, mines and snipers, few of which are likely to be familiar to people on the Armenian side. Even the crossings of Armenians to the Azerbaijani side are seen as ominous: in an exposed Azerbaijani community the arrival of an Armenian raised the fear of positions being probed, in advance of local attacks. To the extent that this report is read on either side, it may serve as a reminder that there typically is more symmetry than either side is willing at first to acknowledge.

All sides should do their utmost to prevent any new such incidents. The border communities illustrate that in an escalation any satisfaction received is likely to be short-lived.

KEY RECOMMENDATION

- All sides should work to prevent new incidents, and explore mechanisms to de-escalate locally, to ensure that the situation does not unintentionally spiral out of control in the future.



Local people hit hard by the escalation of 2014

If they want their communities to thrive, both sides should work to avoid a repeat of 2014, as hostilities hit their own communities hard.

Though the villagers in the mountainous border area of Armenia and Azerbaijan are used to adversity, it is clear that the increase of military action has made life hard for them.

In the worst weeks of 2014, primarily in August, villagers reported that essentially they were living under siege. People on both sides recounted spending time in communal shelters, often improvised spaces. Similarly, people on both sides reported seeking refuge in their basements, or on occasions leaving their houses altogether if they were too exposed. Even households not directly exposed to shooting had their lives impacted, as electricity lines were hit or gas cut off to reduce the risk of fire.

On both sides, many houses were damaged. In the worst-affected communities, more than half of homes were damaged. Authorities on both sides set up various compensation mechanisms. Yet these mechanisms create their own challenges. In some communities people felt insufficiently compensated. In others, materials for repairs are delivered but inhabitants are left to fix their own houses, which is hard for more marginalised families, including those where men of working age have migrated, or when more specialised repairs are required.

"Not a single house is left intact near the Armenian positions. Roofs, windows – everything is hit by Armenian fire. Power lines are often damaged, causing outages that may last for days. Sometimes the village is simply impossible to reach. It's just like a real war..."

57-year-old school teacher, Alibeyli

The damage to communal buildings, such as schools and kindergartens, feeds worries about the well-being of children, reported as the preeminent concern on both sides. Parents are terrified that their children may be killed by a stray bullet or shell. They are also worried that their children cannot

grow up normally as there is too much fear. On both sides, there are reports that children are more scared, and now jump at any loud sound.

If life in the villages is hard, it is not easy, either, to move between them or out of them. In many areas, and on both sides, villagers describe movement as hazardous and frightening. There were several reports of wounded people not being able to get to the hospital as the road out of their village was under fire.

"After sunset the road can be hit by Armenian bullets and shells at any moment. Driving with headlights on at that time is simple suicide. There is no other way but to drive in complete darkness."

35-year-old man, Jafarli

Life has also become particularly tough because people struggle to feed themselves. The overwhelming majority of residents on both sides are farmers. Farming had already been difficult in this mostly mountainous area, and has now been made even more difficult by the increase in hostilities. Both sides reported being targeted, in 2014, while out farming. In more exposed communities people could not harvest at all, or only at night.

"We could not work this summer in the gardens and fields outside, it was too dangerous because of shootings, we just cultivated the land near our houses."

Woman from Nerkin Karmiraghbyur

Irrigation is an additional concern. Azerbaijani communities, being downstream from Armenia, highlight that their fields are parched. To the extent that water flows down from the Armenian side, Azerbaijani communities fear chemical pollution from upstream factories. Yet Armenian farmers, too, mention that irrigation is one of their prime concerns.

"Whenever they see a tractor or another machine working in the field, they start firing."

Man in Chinari

Communities on both the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides, already struggling on a

subsistence-level income, are losing their economic base. Even cattle-herding, often a last resort for subsistence farmers, are proving difficult as shepherds worry about mines and snipers.

People are reluctant to move away. But many also say that they struggle to see a viable future under the circumstances. Some young people highlight that border villages are not an environment in which one can get married and raise a family.

"I was on my way home together with my daughter-in-law and grandson [...] and once we passed the village of Farahli the shooting began. Actually we got stuck, unable either to get back or move forward, and we spent six hours hiding right at the entrance to the village. It was only after the shelling ended that we were able to get home."

Pensioner, Gushchu-Airym

Respondents on both sides pointed to a significant increase in medical problems, which they believe is a result of the more stressful conditions. Though people emphasise that they do want to stay for both personal and patriotic reasons, there is also a perceptible trickle of migration out from the communities, towards places that offer more security and more opportunity.

Support from the central government, such as compensation for damaged property, some tax privileges and cost-reductions, is designed to keep the border communities in place as 'guardians of the border' or the 'first line of defence', as some villagers have put it. Yet 2014 also illustrated how little advantage either side is gaining over the other in such an escalation. The accounts from either side are nearly interchangeable. Both sides have much to gain from exploring a broad number of measures to rein in any future escalation.

KEY RECOMMENDATION

- Compensation, additional donations and privileges are a poor substitute for decreasing hostilities, so that people can continue to live, farm, raise their children, and believe in the future in their communities.

Confidence-building measures could make a major difference



Practical reciprocal measures could improve lives and build confidence, step-by-step.

Given the experience of 2014, all sides may want to explore concrete measures to address the needs of their communities, and also to build confidence more generally. Confidence-building measures (CBMs) have previously been suggested, and their value may be even more apparent to both sides at this point. Border communities would benefit greatly and authorities on both sides would be relieved, at least in part, of having to deal with the consequences, costs and additional risks of ongoing hostilities.

"The kindergarten is not a safe place, but our houses are not safe either."

Woman from Chinari

Based on what the communities say, the safety of children could be a good first focus of exploring concrete measures. Arrangements could be made to reassure children and parents that they are safe, especially in kindergartens and schools. Both sides could explore, for example, whether they can come to an understanding to avoid targeting kindergartens and schools. Such an understanding could involve safe areas and safe times.

If such an approach were successful, one could explore extending it to certain key roads, or at least to making it possible to set up visual cover in locations in which people currently feel exposed to snipers.

Again, this seems to be a shared interest and thus a measure that would yield direct tangible benefit to communities in Armenia and Azerbaijan, as long as a mutually agreed withdrawal of snipers from the front line remains elusive.

"Every time they go to school we feel nervous and afraid. Sometimes I think that it's not a good place for the youth to live. But leaving is not an option – it's their home, their property."

Woman, pensioner, Jafarli

Both sides may also want to explore arrangements for particular situations, especially around farming. Arrangements could be short-term, put into place for specific occasions and in specific locations, to make it possible for communities to earn a living. Such CBMs likely would be most successful if they were reciprocal so that the communities experience a concrete benefit. They could involve arrangements for the use of farming machinery, or also for allowing irrigation. According to local residents, these are concerns of such importance that local communities should be interested in seeing them addressed.

"We used to have good harvests [...] but the farming has come to a standstill, as there is no water. People are powerless to do anything. The water shortage is gradually turning the local farmland into a scorched landscape."

Resident, Kemerli

A further area of potential arrangements could safe access to cemeteries and free movement during religious occasions. Re-establishing an understanding that certain areas are safe would help to rebuild confidence, and reassure local residents.

Overall, concrete measures would improve the lives of the communities and avoid an ongoing spiral of escalation. They would save both sides much effort and cost, as well as human suffering. One potential lesson of 2014 is that concrete CBMs arguably are in the practical interest of both sides. This has not necessarily been clear previously, as sides found they had become used to the previous status quo.

International actors are best placed to promote such practical arrangements, and to undertake first steps. Given that CBMs, in a context of escalation, are typically viewed with suspicion, early small successes are more important than great initial impact. The most promising avenue seems to be to focus on overwhelmingly shared concerns on both sides, to concentrate locally and ensure reciprocal benefit, so that both sides feel they gain from the arrangements.

KEY RECOMMENDATION

- Starting with kindergartens and schools, practical measures could increase the security of communities and build confidence, reciprocally and step-by-step.

Engage communities to resolve their problems

Communities should take the lead in increasing their own capacity to deal with the challenges they face, and in making sure they can cope with potential future hostilities.

People in the affected areas stress that all actors should work with the communities to improve their situation in a number of concrete ways. These measures will help the communities cope with the impact of the conflict, whichever way the overall situation ultimately develops.

People highlighted that they need support to increase their own ability to cope with increased hostilities. Communities need more and better locally available equipment to fight potential fires. Residents want to be trained in how to use this equipment, so that they can quickly put out fires and prevent more damage.

Similarly, people on both sides said that medical services in border communities should be expanded and that citizens should be trained in first aid.

Several communities highlighted that they need better shelters, with reasonable amenities such as bathrooms that allow longer stays in case of ongoing shelling.

"It is not safe to use pastures, so there is no point in keeping cattle."

Villager, Voskevan

People also require support in order to secure their own livelihoods. Irrigation, as highlighted above, is a key topic in many communities. Greenhouses are seen as a promising approach in communities that can only farm small plots because of regular shooting.

"Our village is famous for its blood oranges. This year I did not try even one fruit, we could not take care of the trees."

Woman, Nerkin Karmiraghbyur

Communities on both sides agreed that safer roads would improve their lives. They suggested walls, trenches, visual shelters, or alternative routes to increase security. Improving the quality of existing roads would make it easier for villagers to reach towns, as well as for medical treatment in

emergencies. In nearly all communities, residents had concrete suggestions for potential improvements to the roads around their villages.

"If the local roads were not as bad we would feel more secure during the shooting. These roads are not good for cars that have their lights on. How can we bring an injured or sick man to the administrative centre for emergency treatment by such roads?"

Man, Farahli

Communities on both sides want more employment opportunities. Some highlighted their interest in a revival of local small-scale factories and plants, probably a desire widely shared throughout their countries. In the meantime, a number of measures could help people deal with living in remote mountain locations, close to the front line. Better roads could reduce the cost of bringing items from stores and markets in regional towns. Small business owners on both sides said that it is very difficult to obtain loans, which means that they cannot expand their selection and have to offer few goods at high prices. There appear to be a number of smaller programmes to address this issue. Expanding such programmes could make it easier for people to get access to affordable goods and services, locally.

When the services do become available, citizens appreciate them. The Internet is beginning to play a role, though local authorities remain most important for aggregating and disseminating information to reassure local citizens. Communities in Azerbaijan particularly expressed this desire for reliable information.

"In our village the government provides people with building materials to repair their damaged homes. But is there any point in repairing a house located within the firing range from Armenian positions? No sooner the situation changes than the gunfire will renew."

Man, pensioner, Alibeyli

On both sides, citizens pointed out that there is a need for more psychological services, especially in schools, to help

people (and especially children) on ways to cope with the challenges. Armenian communities emphasised that more cultural and social events would promote the well-being of the communities, and help to overcome potential feelings of marginalisation.

Communities, as mentioned above, stressed that they should be closely involved in the implementation of measures undertaken to support them. While not directly talking about corruption or misappropriation, many people felt that implementation was most likely to succeed if local people were closely involved in making sure that projects met their needs. People highlighted, for example, that some impressive buildings had been put into place that brought little benefit to the communities themselves.

People highlighted leaders who had been successful in mobilising support for their community, as well as the community itself. Conversely, there was significant disdain, again on both sides, about some local leaders that turned up in brief media stunts after shooting incidents, but otherwise had done little to address local needs. Similarly, there was cynicism about regional nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations, with their in-and-out visits and limited local impact.

Yet next to considerable apathy, on both sides of the front line, there also was the feeling that communities were most likely to cope and do well, in these adverse circumstances, if they mobilised themselves and helped each other.

KEY RECOMMENDATION

- Communities should take the lead, and receive help in taking the lead, to increase their own ability to cope with their situation and potential future adversity.

Methodology

The perspectives and ideas in this policy brief are drawn from a series of individual and group interviews held between October–December 2014 in a number of locations close to the international border between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In Azerbaijan, these comprised ten vulnerable rural communities in the Gazakh, Tovuz and Agstafa districts. In Armenia, research focused on nine communities in the Tavush region. In both countries, researchers spoke to a broad representation of households.

Researchers used established qualitative methods of social research, to allow for active participation. The methodology specifically sought the local perspectives, which were summarised and analysed by the teams. Altogether 180 people participated in formal group interviews. Researchers conducted additional expert and informal individual interviews in the communities they studied.

The accompanying report, *Towards a secure future: community voices in border areas of Armenia and Azerbaijan*, details the perspectives from the Armenian and Azerbaijani side, and also provides extensive recommendations made by the communities on how their situation could be improved.

Additionally, this report builds on previous research undertaken by Saferworld in this area, published in a policy brief Nagorny Karabakh conflict and frontline areas (May 2012), and a longer report, *Putting people first: Reducing front-line tensions in Armenia and Azerbaijan, Nagorny Karabakh*.



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About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

We are a not-for-profit organisation that works in over 20 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and Europe.

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