
Clinton pushes for Nagorno-Karabakh solution

By Arshad Mohammed
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YEREVAN (Reuters) - U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on Sunday it was a U.S. priority to help Armenia and Azerbaijan settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and urged them to refrain from violence over the separatist region.

Visiting the two countries on the same day, Clinton delivered identical messages: Washington will do its part to help end the dispute, violence serves no one and a resolution would bring prosperity and stability to the Caucasus.

A tiny mountain region mainly populated by Christian Armenians, Nagorno-Karabakh seceded from Muslim Azerbaijan and proclaimed independence after an early 1990s war that killed some 30,000. Its independence is not recognised by any nation.

Azerbaijan wants Nagorno-Karabakh back, if necessary by force. More than 15 years of mediation have failed to produce a final peace deal and the threat of war is never far away.

Last month, four ethnic Armenian troops and an Azeri soldier died in an exchange of fire near Nagorno-Karabakh.

"The United States cannot resolve the conflicts in this region but we can be a partner and a supporter and an advocate," Clinton said in Baku after meeting Azeri President Ilham Aliyev. "We stand ready to help in any way that we can."

Clinton said she believed there had been progress towards ending the dispute, though she did not provide details, and in both countries she acknowledged the difficulty of the task.

"We know this will not be easy but we think it is the necessary foundation for a secure and prosperous future," she told reporters in Yerevan after talks with Armenian President Serzh Sarkisyan.

Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian said foreign ministers of the two countries might meet on July 16 in a follow up to talks between Aliyev and Sarkisyan last month. MENDING FENCES

Clinton's trip to the region, which has included stops in Ukraine and Poland and will end with a brief visit to Georgia on Monday, has multiple purposes.

In Azerbaijan, she pressed the authoritarian government on human rights while also seeking to mend fences with the strategic country, uneasy about some U.S. diplomatic moves and by perceived slights such as the absence of a U.S. ambassador in Baku for more than a year.

A U.S.-backed push for a rapprochement between Armenia and U.S.-ally Turkey has hurt U.S. relations with Azerbaijan, which worries that its interests will suffer as a result.

Strategically located between Russia and Iran, Azerbaijan has been a key supply route for U.S. troops in Afghanistan. The region is also an important route for oil and gas supplies from the Caspian to Europe.

Clinton pressed Azerbaijan to show greater respect for civil liberties and said she had raised the case of two jailed opposition bloggers sentenced last year after a violent incident in a cafe.

The two say they were the victims of an unprovoked attack. The incident happened soon after video blogger Adnan Hajizade posted his latest tongue-in-cheek swipe at the authorities in which he held a fake news conference dressed as a donkey.

In Armenia, she praised the government for its willingness to move towards normalization with Turkey and she urged Ankara to overcome its reluctance to reopen the border between the two countries, closed because of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute.

"We urge Turkey to take the steps that it promised to take and that both sides continue to try to find the opportunity to open the door to reconciliation and normalization," she said. She called Armenia's readiness to pursue normal ties with Turkey "very statesmanlike and very impressive."

"Now, as they say in sports, the ball is in the other court," she added.

(Additional reporting by Margarita Antidze in Tbilisi, Amie Ferris-Rotman in Moscow and Hasmik Mkrtchyan in Yerevan; Editing by Janet Lawrence)
