

# 'THEY CHAINED ME TO A RADIATOR AND BEAT ME': ARMENIAN POWS SPEAK OUT

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## ***Armenian fighters tell VICE World News stories of brutal abuse at the hands of soldiers from Azerbaijan following the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.***

By [Cristina Maza](#) , [Vice.com](#), 26 April 2021

It was late at night and Armen, a 20-year-old soldier in the Armenian military, was sleeping in an abandoned hut when he was startled awake by a sudden burst of gunfire.

He ran outside to locate the source of the shooting, leaving seven comrades inside the hut, and immediately came under fire from soldiers from Azerbaijan, Armenia's neighbour and rival in the ongoing dispute over who should lay claim to Nagorno-Karabakh, a tiny territory in the Caucasus region that has long been a point of contention.

"The Azerbaijanis began shooting at us, but we couldn't see them," said Armen, who along with every Armenian soldier VICE World News spoke to did so on condition of anonymity due to security concerns.

"Once we had all been injured, they shouted at us in Russian that we should surrender. They said that they would take us to the Red Cross."

The Armenians surrendered, but according to Armen the Azerbaijani soldiers began to beat them as soon as they were in custody. The soldiers kicked Armen in the head and poked him with a metal cooking skewer, he said. They bound his hands so tightly that he now has scars across his wrists.

After the Armenians were transferred to a military police station in Baku, Azerbaijan's capital, the beatings continued, Armen said. He said he remembered being kicked and punched in the head, and hit with pieces of wood. He had wounds on his head, his eyes were swollen shut, and the Azerbaijanis threatened to kill him.

"The military police did not interrogate us; they only beat us. On the first day, they chained my hands to the heating system, and I remained in that position, seated on the floor, throughout the whole night," Armen said. "I was not able to sleep because of the pain. My face, my eye, and my knee ached. They had hit my knee a lot, and it was swollen."

Armen, who was held for several months before being released, is just one of the many Armenians who former detainees, Armenian officials and human rights groups say has been abused in custody following last year's hostilities. Azerbaijan says it has been treating POWs and civilians detained in Azerbaijan in accordance with the Geneva Conventions.

The most recent stage of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh [ended last November with a one-sided peace treaty](#). But between 60 to 220 prisoners are estimated to still be in Azeri custody. Armenian officials say that many of these prisoners have been mistreated.

On the 9th of April, a plane that was expected to bring 25 Armenian prisoners to Yerevan from Baku arrived empty, sparking accusations that Azerbaijan isn't upholding its part of the ceasefire agreement, which stipulated that everyone captured during the conflict would be returned.

The organisation [Human Rights Watch](#) says that many of these prisoners, like Armen, have been subjected to brutal or degrading treatment.

"Azerbaijani forces abused Armenian prisoners of war (POWs) from the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, subjecting them to cruel and degrading treatment and torture either when they were captured, during their transfer, or while in custody at various detention facilities," a report from the group issued in March said.

Giorgi Gogia, a representative of Human Rights Watch in the Caucasus, and one of the report's authors, says that the Armenians should be considered prisoners of war and released.

"Regardless of the status of these individuals in Azerbaijan, Baku still has a very clear and binding obligation to protect their rights to decent conditions in custody and to ensure that they aren't subjected to torture or other forms of cruel or degrading inhumane treatment," Gogia said.

In a statement sent to VICE World News, Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the Human Rights Watch report "one-sided."

"Armenian POWs and civilians detained in Azerbaijan were treated in accordance with the requirements of the 1949 Geneva Conventions," the statement reads, referring to the international rules of armed conflict. "They were not subjected to torture, humiliation and inhuman treatment, and they were provided with the necessary medical care." Many of those who made it back to Armenia say that they were given food and medical treatment while in custody, but they were also beaten and tortured. David, a 19-year-old who was completing compulsory military service in Nagorno-Karabakh when the fighting broke out, says that Azerbaijanis captured him following a gunfight near a village along the road to the Fizuli district.

All of the soldiers in his unit were killed in the fighting or died of thirst after getting stranded without food or water for days. David was left alone with a young Armenian volunteer he met during the conflict.

The young man told David that he would rather die than be captured by the Azerbaijanis. As the enemy soldiers closed in on the two men, David watched as the volunteer shot himself in the head.

At first, the Azerbaijanis gave David water and helped bind his wounds so he wouldn't bleed to death, he said. Then they tied up his hands and brutally beat him.

Later he was transferred to a hospital in Baku, he said, where the doctors bandaged his wounds and brought him bread and water.

"They kept me there for 4 or 5 days and then transferred me into the investigation office," David said..

In an interrogation room, David was forced to record a confession that was later published online.

The Azerbaijanis made him say that the Armenian military had relied on paid mercenaries, including Kurdish fighters, to wage war with them, he said. It wasn't true, but David said he had no choice but to repeat what the Azerbaijanis wanted him to say.

"There were electric shock devices and clubs in the room, and they said that they would beat me to death if I did not say what they wanted," he said. "They told me what I had to say in advance. I wrote it down, and they made me learn it by heart and recite the text. I was not provided with a lawyer."

David, who also suffers from poor eyesight, said that the guards kept taking his glasses and breaking them. Even after the Red Cross brought him a new pair of glasses, the Azerbaijanis broke those, too.



***Stepanakert residents shelter in a basement during the conflict last September. Photo: Brendan Hoffman/Getty Images***

Vazgen, a 25-year-old from Armenia who had volunteered to fight in Nagorno-Karabakh, was similarly taken captive following a gunfight, this time by foreign mercenaries fighting for Azerbaijan

He was severely wounded by the time the mercenaries captured him. He had been lying immobilised for seven days and living off apples that fell from a nearby tree, he said.

The mercenaries brought him, bleeding, to an Azerbaijani military facility. Over the next few hours, he was transferred from unit to unit and brutally beaten, he said.

"The Azerbaijani soldiers inserted their hands into the wound in my stomach. They blew chili pepper into my eyes, and they burnt my hands," he said. "They beat me with batons. Every time I was passed onto a new group of soldiers, I was beaten and tortured."

Vazgen was also forced to record a video in which he insulted Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. In the video, seen by VICE World News, Vazgen's face is drawn from exhaustion and he is wearing camouflage fatigues. An Azerbaijani soldier hits him on the head until Vazgen calls his prime minister a bitch.

Armenia is now asking the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) to intervene and ensure that the Armenians who remain in Azerbaijan don't suffer similar abuse.

Artak Zenalyan, a politician and Armenia's former Minister of Justice, says that the country has opened cases with the ECHR seeking the return of individuals believed to still be alive in Azerbaijan's custody.

"We don't know the exact number of our prisoners of war or who is still alive," Zenalyan said. "We believe that Azerbaijan has killed Armenian prisoners of war."

In a statement sent to VICE World News, the ECHR said it is dealing with interim requests concerning 218 alleged captives. The court has applied Rule 39, which is only applicable when there is imminent risk of irreparable harm, to 186 of them.

Armenian officials, meanwhile, claim that the bodies of Armenian soldiers who appeared alive in videos in Azerbaijan's custody just months ago have appeared recently in Nagorno-Karabakh.

In a video circulating on social media in late November, an 18-year-old Armenian is seen lying on the ground as an Azerbaijani soldier screams at him. That same young man's body was discovered in Nagorno-Karabakh in April, his family says. Azerbaijan's government did not respond to questions about these allegations. The soldiers interviewed say they believe they were released because the Red Cross or Russian peacekeepers knew where they were and visited them in prison. They are afraid that their compatriots whom international actors did not discover could be executed in custody. Nevertheless, negotiations are still quietly underway between the two countries as Armenia works to secure the release of its fighters. "I feel indescribable joy because I am back in my motherland. I feel like I am reborn," says Vazgen, who is now walking with a cane due to his injuries. "But I want the other prisoners of war to return to Armenia."



**There are no comments yet.**