U.S. EXACERBATES AZERBAIJAN'S SECESSIONIST PROBLEMS

Posted on July 8, 2010 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By Appo Jabarian, Executive Publisher / Managing Editor, USA Armenian Life Magazine, 8 July 2010

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Dealing another blow to Ankara, Clinton told reporters in Armenia that the ball is in Turkey's court in regards to normalizing relations between Turkey and Armenia. Turkey dragged the normalization process conditioning it with progress in resolving the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

But Mrs. Clinton’s warning of Georgia against trying to win back the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by force, saying it was “a mistake to focus on the past,” indirectly implied that Azerbaijan must also steer away from making a similar mistake -- “dreaming” to ever re-occupy the Armenian territory of Artsakh (Nagorno Karabagh) both with its lowlands and highlands.

Clinton’s “advice” to Georgian Pres. Saakashvili clearly signals encouragement to Azerbaijan’s restive minorities that have been struggling for either political autonomy from or cultural freedoms in Azerbaijan.

Besides the on-going Artsakh conflict, Azerbaijan is facing a number of dormant political and possibly military conflicts with minorities. Many of those minorities are seen as clear threats, since they live in the border areas next to their kin states, just like the Armenians of Artsakh.

Lea Gerber of CIMERA, a Geneva-based non-profit research organization, reported in spring of 2007 on Azerbaijan’s active minorities.

Gerber noted that according to “the latest population census conducted by the authorities of

Azerbaijan dates from 1999," Azerbaijan has several ethnic minorities such as Lezgis (178,000 or 2.2%), Russians (141,700 or 1.8%), Talyshes (76,800 or 1%), Avars (50,900 or 0.6%), Turks-Meskhetians (43,400 or 0.5%), Tatars (30,000 or 0.4%), Ukrainians (29,000 or 0.4%), Georgians (14,900 or 0.2%), Kurds (13,100 or 0.2%), Tats (10,900 or 0.1%), and Jews (8,900 or 0.1%).

The North Caucasian subgroup includes Lezgis, Avars, Tsakhurs, Udis, Ingiloys, Kryzs, Budugs and Khinaligs, with the Lezgis playing a leading role in this group. They have lived on the territory of present-day Azerbaijan centuries before the then Soviet republic of Azerbaijan was artificially created.

In independent Azerbaijan, Lezgis make up the second largest group after the ethnic Azeris. They live in the northern part of Azerbaijan along the border with Russia.

She underlined that according to the 1999 census, the Lezgi population is 178,000 and constitutes 2.2% of Azerbaijan's population. However, ethnographic research conducted by the Institute of Peace and Democracy between 1994 to 1998 in the north-eastern regions of the country showed that a more realistic number of Lezgis in Azerbaijan ranges between 250,000 and 260,000 people.

"The Lezgi language is part of the Dagestan branch of the Caucasian languages. … Besides Lezgi, another member of the North Caucasian language family is the Udi language. The Udis live in the north of Azerbaijan, in Gabala and Oguz district, where they compactly live in the villages of Nidzh and Oguz. In the 1989 census, 8,000 Udis were counted in the USSR, 6,100 of whom lived in Azerbaijan, with their majority (4,500) residing in the village of Nidzh in Gabala district."

The Udi church can be traced back to the historic church of Old Albania. According to Farida Mammadova, an Azerbaijani historian and head of the Caucasus Albania Research Center, after the Arabian conquest of Caucasus Albania in the eighth century, most of its population, including many Udis, adopted Islam and assimilated with Turkic tribes. But some of them, who lived in the mountainous parts of Caucasus Albania – the Karabakh (Artsakh) and the Sheki-Zagkatala districts of modern Azerbaijan – managed to preserve their beliefs and language through the centuries. Despite the collapse of Caucasus Albania in 705, the Albanian Church existed until the 19th century and had its own places of worship, attended by Udis, further wrote Gerber.

According to the 1999 census, 14,900 Georgians live in Azerbaijan (0.2%). With the exception of about 2,500 Georgians residing in Baku and Ganja, all Georgians live in provinces, namely in the districts of Gakh (7,500 people), Zakatala (3,000 people) and Belakan (2,000 people). … Christian Ingiloys in Azerbaijan call themselves Georgians, whereas in Georgia, they are referred to as The Talysh are an Iranian people who are settled in the south-eastern part of Azerbaijan, mainly in the Lenkeran, Yardimly, Masalli, Lerik and Astara districts. The 1999 census registered 76,800 Talyshs in Azerbaijan. … The 1999 census data undoubtedly under-represents the actual number of the Talysh population. A more realistic number seems to be between 200,000 and 250,000 Talysh living in Azerbaijan, stated she.

The Lezgi Activism since Azeri independence and the eruption of Artsakh (Karabagh) war has been unprecedented. "Tensions between Lezgis and Azeris began in 1992, but reached a peak in mid-1994. Baku's policy of forcibly drafting Lezgi men into the army for deployment in the war in Karabakh resulted in a high mobilization of the Lezgis around this issue. A considerable degree of collective identity was forged during mass demonstrations against the draft, many of which turned violent. With the end of armed conflict in 1994, the protest and mobilizations has subsided," she added.

In reference to another self-determination cause, Gerber described the Talysh activism: "In June 1993, at the time of general turmoil in Azerbaijan which ended the short rule of the Azeri Popular Front, ethnic Talysh Alikram Humbatov, a former commander of a military unit in southern Azerbaijan, proclaimed himself leader of the "Talysh-Mugan Republic". He ordered a group of officers to establish a break-away republic of seven districts of south-east Azerbaijan, which lasted two month. … Accusations of Talysh making agreements with the Armenians have been repeated, for example in 2005, when the Azeri Presidential Consultant on Minorities brought up this issue. Interview with Talysh activists in Lenkeran and Baku in March/April 2007. Arif Yunus stated in this regard that 'significant changes have occurred in Talysh self identification over the last 10 years.'"

In an interview with Zahir Amanov, editor in chief of the "South News" independent newspaper, in Lenkeran in April 2007, Gerber stated: "Talysh activists, in turn, are highly concerned with the fate of the Talysh culture, history and language. Their major claims are to open a faculty for Talysh language in the Lenkeran State University, to broadcast Talysh-language TV programs on state TV for several hours a week, and to get some state funding for organizing Talysh cultural activities like for example folkloric dance. Talysh activists stated further that they would like Talysh to be an official state language, among Azeri and other minority languages as for example Lezgi language.44 Some of the Talysh activists we met went as far as saying that Azerbaijani language developed out of the Talysh language. … At the time we were in Lenkeran, the situation was especially tense due to the recent arrest of a prominent member of the Talysh minority. In February 2007, Novruzali Mammadov, head of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan's Institute of Philology, editor-in-chief of the Talyshlanguage newspaper Tolyshi Sado (Voice of the Talysh) and head of the Talysh Cultural Center, was arrested in Baku and charged with high treason."

Gerber also reported that "In a discussion with one Talysh activist and several Azeri human rights activists, we asked the Talysh activist about the activities of his Talysh cultural centre. He underlined that he does not conduct any political activities. The person next to him laughed and said 'You are Talysh, that's already enough political.' … All the Human Rights activists we met in Lenkeran sharply criticized the authoritarian rule of the Head of the local authorities (executive power) in Lenkeran. … The experience of secessionist forces in the early 90s deeply curved the state's approach towards national minorities. The fear of further separatism and the belief that secessionist trends can only be prevented by suppressing any claims in their emergence characterized the rule of the former

president Heidar Aliev."

And now Aliev the son, Ilham continues his father's oppressive policies toward the minorities to prevent the disintegration of Azerbaijan. But how long will he be able to hold on to the current unstable status quo?

Just like its "big brother" Turkey, Azerbaijan also is a major human rights violator. Therefore, the international community must hold Baku accountable for its mistreatment and abuse of its minorities.

As for Obama, Medvedev, and Sarkozy, the presidents of the Minsk Group co-chair countries USA, Russia, and France, they should take note of Baku's dismal human rights record and steer away from making unprincipled statements on the status of now-liberated Armenian lowlands and highlands of Artsakh.

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