

Armenians hope their fighting spirit will save them amid Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

Stepanakert Letter: Scenes from daily life help illustrate the essence of the war here

🕒 Wed, Oct 28, 2020, 18:18

Amanda Coakley in Stepanakert



The children are gone and only a few women remain. Stepanakert, the de facto capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, has become a city of men. The streets are quiet aside from the odd ambulance, military Jeep or Lada banger grunting along. The supermarket shelves are thinning and the menu options at the Armenia Hotel leave much to be desired.

So much of this war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which erupted on September 27th, is from another time. In the south it's mostly trench warfare, where young men huddle in shallow narrow trenches. Decaying bodies are scattered across no man's land – there are reports of wild pigs tearing at rotting flesh at night.

In villages, families are packed on to buses and sent to Yerevan, Armenia's capital. Some refuse to leave and retreat to a life underground. Every day brings rumours of Azeri advances, fresh propaganda and stories of loss.

In Stepanakert you can talk about the war, but you cannot analyse it. The Armenians' love for this land, and their willingness to die for it, has hindered their ability to talk about it frankly. A dark flash crosses their face when you mention Azeri gains or press for facts about strategy.

They are a nation of fighters and firmly believe their fighting spirit, coupled with their advantage of having the higher ground in Nagorno-Karabakh, will save them in the end. When asked in an interview with this reporter how the Armenians can defend against Azeri drones, which have been supplied by Turkey and Israel and have inflicted heavy losses, the president of Nagorno-Karabakh, Arayik Harutyunyan, said: "This is a sacred war, and the side who fights a sacred fight, wins."

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At the media centre in Stepanakert, which tightly shepherds international journalists, every opportunity to show us a shot-down drone is taken. The reality is the Armenians can't defend the sky on their own: they need support from outside, and that has been slow to come.

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Tender moment

If someone randomly hands you a piece of fruit in Nagorno-Karabakh it's not because they think you're hungry. They are giving you a part of their home which they have had to flee because of the fighting. It's a tender moment and should be treated with respect.

On the many minibuses out of Stepanakert, the bag of fruit is treated with a special reverence. It's likely the succulent apples and king oranges, which are called Arqayanaring, will fade before the end of this most recent escalation. After three humanitarian ceasefire announcements, the bellicose rhetoric and fighting continues – but the fruit is symbolic of the essence of this conflict. On both sides it's about ownership of every blade of grass in Karabakh.

On Tumanyan Street, Hovik Asmaryan and his wife Isabel, Syrian Armenians from Aleppo, serve free meals all day to soldiers and journalists alike – “It's my duty to my country,” Hovik says.

One of the most remarkable meals this reporter has had in Nagorno-Karabakh was served on the front line in the company of a group of young soldiers aged between 18 and 20. Arthur, a cheeky boy of 18, was working as a chef before the war and had taken over kitchen duties in the trenches.

Without a moment's notice he whipped up some chicken with lentils and bread. It was wholesome and honest and came peppered with questions regarding how much carbohydrates the Irish eat compared to the Armenians. The decision was made not to debate such a contentious issue – there would be no winner.

Daily life

Daily life is quiet in Stepanakert but wrapped around the silence is a determination to win the war. The people here are a broad cast of characters. The well-dressed family alone in a shelter every night drinking Karabakhti vodka in memory of the dead. The young soldiers guarding the hotels who are glued to social media, waiting to be called up to the front.

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The volunteers asleep in hotel lobbies after walking 4km across the worst front lines under heavy shelling to deliver supplies to the troops. The

Baudelaire-loving colonel in a military bunker sitting with a Finnish rifle and reading Dante’s Divine Comedy.

The city seems oblivious to the encroaching front line. This is both a comfort and a cause for concern. Mass is still said daily, and the bakeries still churn out delicious fresh bread. It could be the calm before the storm, or the energy these men need to protect their homeland.

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Self-declared hunter trades big game for jihadists in Burkina Faso

ians given authority to take law into their own hands to stop spread of militant violence



🕒 Tue, Mar 9, 2021, 01:00

Amanda Coakley in Fada N’Gourma

Outside his temporary lodgings in the city of Fada N’Gourma in eastern Burkina Faso, Timothé Mano proudly waves the blade that he alleges has ended the lives of dozens of militants. The 46-year-old is a commander in the VDP, a civilian volunteer force legalised in early 2020 to help Burkina Faso’s beleaguered army combat the growing threat posed by armed Islamists.

He is a self-declared hunter and is delighted to have traded hunting big game in the nearby Arli National Park for stalking jihadists on the outskirts of the city. “When I heard the government was asking for people to volunteer themselves and fight against those who are coming to attack us, I knew I had to join,” he says.

During the week Timothé shuttles back to his village, Tanwalbougou, about 45km east of Fada, where he, along with another, commands more than 100 boys and men. Over the past year they have fought the jihadists about 23 times. They have received no equipment from the government, despite promises, so have resorted to taking weapons from the battlefield. They claim none of their own has been killed.

Burkina Faso, once one of the most stable countries in west Africa, has fallen prey to the militant violence sweeping across the Sahel, a semi-arid region that stretches across north Africa.

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Until recently this area was crawling with militants who had links to the Islamic State terror group

Armed groups, many with links to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel, have pushed the Burkinabe government from large swathes of the north and east, displaced more than one million people and killed thousands. Burkina Faso is trying to stop the spread of violence before it reaches the Gulf of Guinea. To help do that, the government has given men with minimal training the authority to take the law into their own hands.

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Timotheé
Mano driving
in
Tanwalbougou,
Burkina Faso.
Photograph:
Amanda
Coakley

Timotheé is Gourmanché and feels deep resentment towards the Fulani, another ethnic minority in the country. The Fulani, who are traditionally semi-nomadic herders, are Muslim like the majority of Burkinabe – citizens of Burkina Faso – and have long been sidelined by society.

These tensions have been exploited by the jihadists, who use them to recruit Fulani to their ranks. This, in turn, has led to the Fulani community being targeted by the security services and volunteer militia, such as the VDP, who suspect them all of terrorist activity.

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“Today when somebody says Fulani it means enemy,” says Timothé, “they are very dangerous. Back home [in Tanwalbougou], a single Fulani cannot cross the road.” Later, he issues a dark threat: “Unless the government helps to stabilise all the Fulani, what we need to do is kill all of them.”

To corroborate Timothé’s stories, and his rank in the VDP, The Irish Times travelled to Tanwalbougou.

Village life

The road to the village is decorated with wide, deep potholes. It’s quiet. The villages on the roadside are deserted. Until recently this area was crawling with militants who had links to the Islamic State terror group. On the outskirts of Tanwalbougou is an elegant mosque. In the centre of the village marketeers sell their wares and a few schoolchildren walk home from class. The local gendarmerie comprise men in their 20s wielding AK-47s.

This is the site of alleged extrajudicial executions of 12 Fulani men in May 2020, who were taken into custody after a counterterrorism operation in the neighbouring village of Pentchangou. Timothé heard about the men, but says he was sick on the day of the operation and knows nothing about it.

Women
shopping
in the
open air
market.

Despite an investigation into the deaths being announced, the government has shown little desire to follow through and draw conclusions. Before questions about May 11th can be put to the gendarmes, the national head of the VDP tells Timothé to revoke permission for The Irish Times's visit to Tanwalbougou.



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Before the G5 Sahel summit in N'Djamena in February, Human Rights Watch reported more than 600 unlawful killings by the security forces of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger during counterterrorism operations since late 2019.

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Their guerrilla war against the militants, and subsequent role in negotiations, has brought a resemblance of peace to the village

Over the past few months however, the number of extrajudicial killings reported in Burkina Faso has reduced. “Since August 2020 the allegations have decreased,” says Corinne Dufka, Sahel director for Human Rights Watch, “but we’re also concerned that there’s been little to no apparent effort to investigate the myriad violations, including massacres, by all sides, including the state security forces, and we believe the lack of investigations and accountability could contribute to a resurgence of indiscipline and abuse.”

Negotiations

Across Burkina Faso it’s widely acknowledged that negotiations between the authorities and some militants have started, and this has contributed to the much-improved security situation.

“There are two reasons to explain the decrease in the number of attacks,” Mahamadou Sawadogo, a respected Burkinabe conflict researcher, tells The Irish Times. “The first: the success of Barkhane [France’s military intervention] and its allies, putting pressure on the various armed groups along the three-border area. The second: the beginning of negotiations between the government and the armed groups.”

In early February, prime minister Christophe Dabiré raised the option of negotiations during a speech in parliament and, in private, western diplomats are aware that dialogues have started. According to Timothé, negotiations began in Fada in October.

In Tanwalbougou, the VDP’s presence and close relationship with the gendarmes is evident. Their guerrilla war against the militants, and

subsequent role in negotiations, has brought a resemblance of peace to the village but questions about human rights abuses linger.



They are confident in their mission and authority, but there is no plan for how to disband them when they are no longer needed. On the drive out of Tanwalbougou, armed boys line up alongside the car – one has a picture of socialist revolutionary Thomas Sankara glued to the butt of his weapon. They are not going anywhere soon.

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