
RUSSIA SAYS ARMENIAN-AZERI PEACE DEAL IS CLOSER THAN EVER

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Russia is taking the lead in ramping up international efforts to end the conflict between Azeris and Armenians over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh after the worst outbreak of fighting in more than 20 years.

We have reasons to believe that were much closer now to success than ever before in reaching a peace deal, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told a news conference Tuesday in the Azeri capital, Baku, after talks with President Ilham Aliyev. Negotiations have never been so intensive. Theyre also substantive Azeri Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov said at the same event.

Talks with Aliyev on Monday were positive, said Lavrov, who was in Baku after meeting with Armenian Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandyan in Yerevan last week. His visit comes after U.S. President Barack Obama expressed his readiness to intensify efforts to settle the conflict in phone talks with Russian leader Vladimir Putin on Wednesday, according to the White House.

Diplomacy to resolve the conflict increased after more than 200 people died in four days of intense fighting in April before Russia negotiated a truce. It was the worst outbreak of violence since Armenians took over Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent districts from Azerbaijan in a war after the Soviet collapse in 1991. While a Russian-brokered cease-fire halted the fighting in 1994, international mediators failed to secure a lasting peace.

The enclaves mainly Armenian population has declared independence, which hasnt been recognized internationally, and insists on its right to self-determination. Armenia backs that position. Azerbaijan, which has attracted more than \$50 billion of investments in energy projects by BP Plc and its partners in the past 20 years, says its ready to grant autonomy, but demands respect for its territorial integrity.

Kerry Visit

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry will travel to Moscow on Thursday to discuss the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with senior Russian officials, as well as the crises in Syria and Ukraine, the State Department said in a statement. Putin may meet with Kerry during his visit, Kremlin spokesman

Dmitry Peskov told reporters on a conference call Tuesday.

International mediators are making unprecedented diplomatic efforts to secure a peace deal, Tatul Hakobyan, a political analyst in Yerevan, said by phone. Russia wants peace in the Caucasus but they want to bring it themselves to strengthen their role in the region.

Russia, the U.S. and France are joint mediators of the peace talks through the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Putin held summit talks with Aliyev and Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan in St. Petersburg on June 20. Kerry and French President Francois Hollande held separate meetings with Sargsyan to discuss Nagorno-Karabakh on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Warsaw last week.

Interim Status

Russia is trying to ensure the cease-fire holds and isnt pressing Armenia to withdraw from Azeri districts around Nagorno-Karabakh, Elxan Shahinoglu, head of the Atlas research group in Baku, said by e-mail. Without that, the conflict wont be resolved peacefully so that in return for Armenian withdrawal, Azerbaijan may agree to an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh as part of a step-by-step peace deal, he said.

Russia wants a deal in which Azerbaijan concedes a strong interim status for Karabakh in return for Armenians handing back some of the territory they took, Hakobyan said. Armenians in the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic are not ready to give up any territory, while Sargsyan wants a referendum to secure the territorys future status before returning land, he said.

Russias seeking a settlement because the alternative will be war, Rasim Musabayev, a member of Azerbaijans parliament, said by phone Monday. Azerbaijan hasnt pulled back its troops from the frontline areas after the April fighting.

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