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## **MERKEL CALLS FOR PEACEFUL RESOLUTION OF KARABAKH CONFLICT**

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Friday urged Armenia and Azerbaijan to find a peaceful solution to the ex-Soviet republics' long-running territorial conflict over the Nagorny Karabakh region.

"It is important that the conflict is resolved peacefully," Merkel told a press conference in Yerevan, on the second day of her regional trip to the South Caucasus.

"Germany stands ready to contribute to the peaceful resolution" of the decades-long conflict, she added.

Karabakh has been under Armenian control since it was seized during a bloody war in the early 1990s after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Baku and Yerevan remain locked in a bitter dispute with frequent exchanges of fire along the volatile frontline nearly spiralling back into all-out war in 2016.

The international community still views Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan and no country has recognised it as an independent nation.

Energy-rich Azerbaijan, whose military spending exceeds Armenia's entire state budget, has repeatedly threatened to take back the breakaway region by force.

Moscow-allied Armenia has vowed to crush any military offensive.

On Saturday, Merkel will travel to Azerbaijan, where she is expected to discuss energy cooperation with the oil-rich Caspian nation which is seen as an alternative to Russian supplies of natural gas and oil to Europe.

She arrived in Yerevan from Georgia where she denounced Russian military presence in the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as Russia's "occupation of the 20 percent of Georgia's territory and a great injustice".

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