



Azerbaijan remembers Black January tragedy

Thirty years have passed today since 20 January 1990 which went down the history of Azerbaijan as Black January tragedy, military invasion and indiscriminate killing of civilians by the Soviet troops in Baku.

In response to the rising national independence movement and protests against the violation of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and upon the instruction of Mikhail Gorbachev, then Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, the Soviet leadership ordered some 26000 troops heavily armed and equipped with military combat vehicles in an operation called "Strike" to storm Baku on the night from 19 to 20 January 1990. The heavy-handed crackdown resulted in brutal killing of 144 with more than 740 injured. Among victims were women, children, elderly representing different nationalities living in Baku. The Soviet army also attacked the state television building, cutting off the power supply in an attempt to prevent the dissemination of news to the international community. The former soviet leadership is directly responsible for this crime.

In its report dedicated to the Black January, Human Rights Watch notes: "Indeed, the violence used by the Soviet Army on the night of January 19–20 was so out of proportion to the resistance offered by Azerbaijanis as to constitute an exercise in collective punishment. The punishment inflicted on Baku by Soviet soldiers may have been intended as a warning to nationalists, not only in Azerbaijan, but also in other republics of the former Soviet Union. The Wall Street Journal editorial dated 4 January 1995 wrote that the then Soviet leader Gorbachev chose to use violence against independence-seeking Azerbaijan."

Immediately after the tragic events, national leader Heydar Aliyev sharply condemned this atrocity, called it an act against democracy and humanity and demanded political assessment of the massacre against people of Azerbaijan and punishment for perpetrators. The tragedy of 20 January received a political-legal assessment after the return of Heydar Aliyev to the political power in Azerbaijan. At the special session of Milli Majlis (Parliament) in February 1994, the brutal killing of innocent people was regarded as the military aggression and crime.

The roots of January events were in the continuing aggression of Armenia against Azerbaijan. The strong indignation and protest of the people of

Azerbaijan was also caused by the soviet authorities' connivance, stemming from the prejudiced and biased policy of the Communist Party and the soviet leadership towards Azerbaijan, at the aggressive separatist activities of the Armenian chauvinists in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region of Azerbaijan as well as the violent and brutal deportation of hundreds of thousands of the indigenous Azerbaijani population from Armenia. An analysis of the events of 1988-1990 clearly shows that they were a part of Armenia's open aggressive policy against Azerbaijan with the full support of the central Soviet authorities, particularly M.Gorbachev, which had the ultimate goal to seize the territories of Azerbaijan.

Every year on 20 January, hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis visit the Martyrs' Alley to pay a tribute to the memory of victims of this tragedy. This day is a national mourning day in Azerbaijan with nationwide commemorations taking place and the national flag flying at half-mast over the public buildings and diplomatic missions abroad.

Though it is remembered as tragic event, Black January was the deciding factor in forming Azerbaijani national identity and became a milestone on the road to Azerbaijan's independence from the Soviet Union. It weakened the Soviet rule in Azerbaijan, accelerated the disintegration of the Soviet Union and led to the regaining of the independence by Azerbaijan in 1991.

This day is also a time to reflect on the value and importance of the independence. Those killed on that day sacrificed their lives for the independence of Azerbaijan and it is our duty to hold memories of the martyrs dear to our hearts.

Geneva, 20 January 2020