



Azerbaijan remembers Black January tragedy

20 January 2021 marks the thirty-first anniversary of one of the saddest episodes in the history of Azerbaijan. On that day, in response to the rising national independence movement, protests against the illegal territorial claims of neighboring Armenia, and forcible mass expulsion of more than 250,000 indigenous Azerbaijanis from Armenia, 26,000 Soviet military upon the instruction of then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev invaded Baku and attempted, but failed, to crush the nation's dream for independence.

In downtown Baku, the Alley of Martyrs stands as a solemn reminder to 147 civilians killed and 744 injured in what has come to be known later in the history as "Black January" tragedy. Among victims were women, children, elderly people representing different nationalities living in Baku. Soviet Army also attacked the state television building, cutting off the power supply in an attempt to prevent the dissemination of news to 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".

Immediately after the tragic events, national leader of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev condemned this atrocity, called it an act of aggression against democracy and humanity, and demanded political assessment of the massacre of people of Azerbaijan and punishment of perpetrators. At the special session of the Milli Majlis (Parliament) of Azerbaijan in February 1994, the brutal killing of innocent people was regarded as the military aggression and crime.

Black January has become the deciding factor in further consolidating Azerbaijani national unity and an important milestone on the road to Azerbaijan's independence from the Soviet Union. At the end, all efforts to keep Azerbaijan under the Soviet rule proved worthless. The military assault on Baku authorized by Soviet leadership had the opposite effect – instead of suppressing the independence movement, it further encouraged people of Azerbaijan in their drive for freedom from the Soviet rule, accelerated the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and led to the regaining of independence by Azerbaijan in 1991.

Every year on 20 January, thousands of citizens of Azerbaijan lay flowers to the graves of the fallen at the Alley of Martyrs on a hill top overlooking Baku, and each year precisely at noon, the country observes a minute of silence accompanied by the horns of cars and passenger trains, and ships in the Bay of Baku.

This year, along with the Black January victims who sacrificed their lives for the independence of Azerbaijan on that day in 1990, the people of Azerbaijan also pay tribute to those Azerbaijani servicemen who lost their lives during the 44 day-long Patriotic War in September – November of 2020 for liberation of the Qarabağ region of Azerbaijan and restoration of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan after 28 years of Armenian occupation.

Geneva, 20 January 2021

