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## **Khojali Tragedy remembered**

“I had heard a lot about wars, about the cruelty of Fascists, but the Armenians were worse killing five and six year-old children, killing innocent civilians”, said a French journalist, Jean-Yves Junet, who visited the scene of mass murder in Khojali.

Khojali was a little known small town in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. On February 25-26, 1992, Armenian troops together with the 366<sup>th</sup> Motor Rifle Regiment of the Russian Army occupied the town while committing one of the most heinous crimes against humanity. Armenians brutally slaughtered hundreds of innocent civilians and spared virtually no one who had been unable to flee the town. Many others froze to death as they tried to escape the savagery and the torture of the Armenian army in below-zero temperature. In the process the Armenians brutally murdered 613 people, annihilated whole families, captured 1275 people, left 1,000 civilians maimed or crippled, and another 150 people unaccounted for in their wake.

This savage cruelty against innocent women, children and the elderly is unfathomable in and of itself but the senseless brutality did not stop with Khojali. Khojali was simply the first. In fact, the level of brutality and the unprecedented atrocities committed at Khojali set a pattern of destruction and ethnic cleansing that Armenian troops would adhere to for the remainder of the war.

Human Rights Watch called the tragedy at the time “the largest massacre to date in the conflict.”

*The New York Times*, 3 March 1992, wrote about “truckloads of bodies” and described acts of “scalping”.

Memorial, a Russian human rights group, reported that “scores of the corpses bore traces of profanation. Doctors on a hospital train in Aghdam noted no less than four corpses that had been scalped and one that had been beheaded..... and one case of live scalping”.

*The Independent* reported: “Elif Kaban, a Reuters correspondent in Aghdam, reported that after a massacre, Azeris were burying scores of people who died when Armenians overran the town of Khojali, the second-biggest Azeri settlement in the area. 'The world is turning its back on what's happening here. We are dying and you are just watching', one mourner shouted at a group of journalists.”

*The Age* (Melbourne, Australia) reported: “The exact number of victims is still unclear, but there can be little doubt that Azeri civilians were massacred by the Armenian Army in the snowy mountains of Nagorno-Karabakh last week.”

Every year, those residents of Khojali, who survived the massacre--many still scattered among one million refugees and displaced persons in camps around Azerbaijan--appeal with pain and hope to the international community to hold Armenia responsible for this crime.

Khojali is, perhaps, the most tragic page in independent Azerbaijan's history and a vivid reminder of the consequences of Armenian aggression.

February 26 is a Memorial Day for Azerbaijanis worldwide. The people of Azerbaijan will forever remember where they were on February 25-26, 1992, like Americans will forever remember they were on the tragic morning of September 11, 2001.