

Azerbaijan, Armenia in fresh firefight on Nagorno-Karabakh border
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Azerbaijan on Wednesday accused Armenian forces of firing on its troops on the disputed border with the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, but Armenia said the attack came from the Azeri side first. The incident was the latest in a series of firefights between forces of the two former Soviet republics in recent months which have claimed several lives and left the decade-old ceasefire between the two sides under strain. The firefight early Tuesday forced observers from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to abandon a visit to the area to monitor the ceasefire, according to the Azeri defence ministry. An OSCE spokesman said he could not confirm the report, but Armenia officials denied that they had opened fire first.

"The fire came from the Azeri district of Tovuz, near the Armenian border, when monitors from both sides were checking on the ceasefire," an Armenian defense ministry official told AFP. Azerbaijan's defence ministry said the clash happened near the village of Agdam in the Tovuz region of north-western Azerbaijan. It said Azeri troops returned fire and suffered no casualties. Andrzej Kasprzyk, the OSCE's special envoy for Nagorno-Karabakh, who was in the area for a routine inspection of the ceasefire line, cut short his visit because of the shooting, the statement said.

Nagorno-Karabakh's mainly ethnic Armenian population fought a war of secession from Azerbaijan which ended in a ceasefire in 1994, with most of the enclave under the de facto control of Armenia. The fighting displaced about a million people from their homes and left tens of thousands dead on both sides. The two countries remain on a war footing, with a permanent peace settlement proving elusive. Western governments fear that a flare-up in the conflict could destabilize the Caucasus region, which is soon to become a major crossroads for oil exports from the Caspian Sea to world markets.