

Azerbaijan

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Azerbaijani army serviceman during a military operation near Nagorno-Karabakh earlier this week. Photograph: Azerbaijan defence ministry/EPA

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As fighting raged between Armenian and Azerbaijan for a fifth day, details were published of a phone call between the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, and his Turkish counterpart, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, in which the two spoke of the need for an immediate end to the fighting.

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“They reaffirmed their readiness to closely coordinate the actions of Russia and Turkey to stabilise the situation in order to return the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to a peaceful negotiation channel as soon as possible,” the statement said.

Turkey’s foreign ministry is yet to release details of the call. Earlier, Erdoğan told the Turkish parliament that Armenia had to withdraw from Nagorno-Karabakh if there was to be lasting peace in the region, where Turkey’s ally Azerbaijan and ethnic Armenian forces have clashed since Sunday.

“Given that the USA, Russia and France have neglected this problem for nearly 30 years, it is unacceptable that they are involved in a search for a ceasefire,” he said.

As his speech was ending, the three countries issued a statement demanding an immediate ceasefire. France, Russia and the United States are co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, which was set up in 1992 to mediate a peaceful resolution over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave.

Thursday’s clashes were less intense than in previous days, but Armenia said two French journalists covering its clashes with Azerbaijan had been injured by shelling as they were visiting an Armenian-held town.

The reporters for Le Monde were reportedly injured by Azerbaijani artillery in the town of Martuni. The pair were taken to hospital in the region’s capital and one was in “grave condition” and undergoing surgery, Armenian authorities said.

The French president, Emmanuel Macron, confirmed that the two were injured in remarks to journalists as he arrived at the European council on Thursday. “We are putting all our efforts into repatriating them,” he said.

A Russian news outlet said one of its journalists was also caught up in the bombardment, but managed to make it to a bunker in time. “Fortunately, there was a basement nearby, and we all ran there,” the Russian correspondent, Dmitry Elovsky, told his outlet. “Colleagues from Le Monde were in a different car.”

In a statement, Azerbaijan’s foreign ministry accused Armenia of “grossly violating international humanitarian law” by facilitating foreign journalists’ visits to the frontline and “endangering their lives”.

The journalists were reportedly being shown houses that had been shelled in the region over which Armenian and Azerbaijan are fighting. Nagorno-Karabakh is legally recognised as Azerbaijani territory, but has a mostly Armenian population who have ruled themselves since the last major war over the area ended in 1994.

There are fears that the longer the fighting continues, the greater the risk becomes of the conflict dragging in regional powers including Russia and Iran. Turkey has openly sided with Azerbaijan, and Turkish security companies are accused of sending Syrian mercenaries into the battle, though Ankara denies this. Russia’s foreign ministry said on Wednesday that Syrian and Libyan fighters from illegal armed groups were being sent to the Nagorno-Karabakh regions.

A spokesman for the foreign ministry in Iran, which neighbours Armenia and has a fraught relationship with Azerbaijan, expressed concern at the presence of Syrian fighters in the battle, as well as at reports – so far unproven – that Armenia has shipped in Kurdish militants to fight on its side.

“The Islamic Republic of Iran will not allow terrorist groups in the areas adjacent to the northern borders of our country to become a centre of threat against our national security,” the spokesman said at a press conference in Tehran.

Israel is also embroiled in the conflict as a long-time arms supplier to Azerbaijan, which has tested its relationship with Armenia. On Thursday, Armenia’s foreign ministry spokeswoman Anna Naghdalyan said her country had recalled its ambassador to Israel. “Israel’s work style is unacceptable,” she said.

France accused Turkey of sending Syrian mercenaries to fight in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and said it was working with Russia to reach a ceasefire.

Macron, who has been in a war of words with Erdoğan for months, said on Wednesday that Ankara was acting in a “warlike” manner.

Russia has a military base in Armenia and considers it to be a strategic partner. France’s population includes about 600,000 people of Armenian origin.

Reuters contributed to this report