

# ARMENIANS ON HUNGER STRIKE

By **Vincent J. Schodolski, Chicago Tribune**

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**V**ictor Ambartsumian, one of the Soviet Union's leading astronomers, celebrated his 82nd birthday Tuesday surrounded by good friends, his son and dozens of bright pink roses.

But there was a difference this year. He also spent his birthday on a hunger strike.

Ambartsumian is one of five Armenians staging a hunger strike in a central Moscow hotel to dramatize their demand for restoration of local civilian rule in the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The strike began 10 days ago at the Moskva Hotel just beside Red Square. The five-four of whom are members of the Soviet legislature-have been subsisting on just 4 1/2 pints of water a day.

Some have vowed to continue their strike until President Mikhail Gorbachev restores local rule in Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian enclave inside Azerbaijan near the Armenian border. The Soviet army assumed full control of the mountainous enclave in July 1988, in the midst of serious ethnic unrest.

The strikers listed their demands in a letter to Gorbachev and said he responded by expressing regret over their decision.

"He promised to do his utmost to restore peace and security in the region, but he never mentioned the need to restore civilian rule," said Zori Balayan, a member of the all-USSR parliament, known as the Congress of Peoples' Deputies.

The hunger strikers maintain the Gorbachev has violated the Soviet constitution by keeping the region under Moscow's direct rule from Moscow. Last month the Armenian parliament, in declaring the republic's sovereignty, reasserted a demand for formal unity with the enclave.

"This is a violation of the law," Ambartsumian said as he lay in a small bed just a few feet from Balayan. "This is a bad thing when a government does not abide by its own laws."

Soviet Armenians never accepted the decision by Josef Stalin in 1923 to place Nagorno-Karabakh under Azerbaijani control. It is populated mostly by some 150,000 Armenians, but Azerbaijan also lays historical claim to it. For the last three years it has been the focus of ethnic violence that has left hundreds dead and created thousands of refugees.

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er of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and is  
re U.S. National Academy of Sciences.

He said he and his fellow hunger strikers see restoration of local rule in the area as a small step that might break the deadlock that has prevented any solution of the confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

"My desire is that Karabakh be part of Armenia," he said in the hotel room crowded with advisers and journalists as the Armenian Bishop of Russia, Tiran Gurchian, stood at his bedside. "This is a problem that has to be solved with a long process and with concessions."

In a separate incident, Patriarch Vazgen of Armenia sent Gorbachev a telegram complaining that on Sept. 9, a group of soldiers surrounded and fired on a monastery in Armenia. The lives of Armenian orthodox priests in Nagorno- Karabakh are now in danger, he said.

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