

“THIS WAS A BLOODBATH. I HAVEN’T SEEN ANYTHING MORE HORRIFYING IN MY LIFE”

IN THE EARLY HOURS OF 26 FEBRUARY 1992, ARMENIAN ARMED FORCES SUPPORTED BY MILITARY HARDWARE AND PERSONNEL OF INFANTRY REGIMENT NO 366 OF THE FORMER SOVIET UNION STATIONED IN KHANKENDI CAPTURED THE AZERBAIJANI TOWN OF KHOJALI.



Artist Nadir Bayrishov

Survivors of the assault on the town, around 2,500 people, had to leave their homes hoping to reach the nearby town of Agdam. However, not all of them managed to escape as Armenian gangs perpetrated a massacre against defenseless civilians. The fugitives ran along a corridor adjacent to Agdam District of Azerbaijan but were met with intense fire. **As a result, a total of 613 people, including 63 children, 106 women and 70 old people, were killed.**

The very next day the world saw video footage made at the scene by Azerbaijani TV journalist Chingiz Mustafayev. **The bodies shown in the film belonged to those who fled Khojali and ran towards Agdam, but were met by Armenian militants a few kilometers from the town.** The images Chingiz Mustafayev shot from a helicopter show



Artist Asgar Mammadov

randomly scattered bodies of the massacred people. The journalist filmed bodies of children, women and elderly people, and then the process of sending the bodies to Agdam by helicopter.

Journalist **Bahram Batuyev** has found **Maj Leonid Kravets**, commander of the helicopter from which the film was shot. He currently lives in Ukraine. This is what he had to say.

- We flew from Ganja to Karabakh almost every day. As far as I can remember, **the tragedy occurred before the withdrawal of the 366th regiment from Khankendi**. We flew over Khojali

five to seven times a day. I knew the area very well. We were phoned from Baku and warned that the Armenians were preparing to capture Khojali. We were asked for help in evacuating women, children and the elderly. Over three days we managed to take about 1,000 civilians from Khojali to Agdam.

Khojali was a thorn in the side of the Armenians. Attempts were always made to capture the town, but it was well fortified. We were delivering arms and the militia to the town. Although we took many civilians out of Khojali, there were still quite a few women, children and the el-

derly remaining. The town was quite big by local standards.

On the morning of 26 February 1992, when we were flying back from somewhere near Khankendi, my copilot shouted, "Look how many rags are scattered down below!". I looked down and noticed that the field below us was full of different colors. We descended a little and realized that those were dead bodies. **There were no less than 300-400 bodies, maybe even more. Militants were walking in the field and killing those wounded.** When they saw us, then started firing at the



One of the first witnesses of Armenian atrocities in Khojali

helicopter. But we managed to get away. We were completely shocked! I had never seen anything like that, and I had seen a lot. This was a mass murder of the civilian population. I hadn't seen anything more monstrous in my whole life. I immediately informed my commanders who communicated the message to Baku.

- *What did the authorities do?*

- The same evening a representative of the Azerbaijani president arrived and asked us to take him and a group of journalists to the site. Military commanders gave the go-ahead, and we

flew to Agdam where we were joined by Chingiz Mustafayev's crew and several foreign correspondents. We also took several policemen from Khojali on board. **We could not land on the field as we were immediately fired on even though there was a red cross on the helicopter.** I said that I would disembark everyone and then climb a little because if I stay, the helicopter would be immediately fired at by a grenade launcher. We agreed that I would circle over the territory for five to seven minutes and then come back to pick up everyone.

I climbed to a certain al-

titude and noticed that several vehicles were coming in our direction from Khojali. I landed on the field immediately and began to rush everyone so that we could fly off quickly. Chingiz Mustafayev and his people managed to recover a few corpses of children. There was a police captain with us whom we had picked up in Agdam. He found the body of his three- or four-year-old child. The body was terribly mutilated, the thugs had put a whole round in it. The captain passed the child's body on board but was himself motionless. We barely managed to drag him on board



as the helicopter was taking off. While we were flying to Agdam, the man was pressing the corpse of his child against his chest and weeping. When we approached the town, it became clear that the grief-stricken father has lost his mind. He could not even get out after landing in Agdam.

Can you imagine what happens when a bullet enters a child's head? It blows a part of it away. That policeman's child had practically nothing left of the head. **I personally saw dozens of bullets in the bodies of children we were carrying. People had come under in-**

tense fire.

- The Armenian side claims that Armenian troops were not involved in the killings of civilians in Khojali. It says the people had been granted "safe passage" through which they could go to Agdam ...

- The Armenians attacked Khojali from three sides and left one side ostensibly for the civilians to escape. But even there they established machine-gun points to fire on the fugitives. People were trapped and had no chances of survival. This was a horrible massacre, a carefully planned action. After all, everything happened at night. People's

bodies were scattered on a mountain slope over an area of two to three kilometers. The direction of people's movement had been established in advance...

After two or three days, Chingiz Mustafayev showed the video footage of the Khojali tragedy on television, and the Azerbaijani population of Nagorno-Karabakh started to panic. After this tragedy, the evacuation of the civilian population was sped up. People were afraid that the same could happen to them too ... 🌱