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(file photo) Ethnic Armenian soldiers on the front line in Karabakh

Azerbaijani forces have killed three Armenia-backed separatist soldiers on the front lines of the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region, the separatists' self-described defense ministry said.

Azerbaijani troops had shelled the Karabakh soldiers' positions using antitank grenade launchers, the ministry said on June 16.

"Three servicemen of the Karabakh army, all aged 20, were killed as a result," it said.

Azerbaijan and Armenia, both former Soviet states, are locked in a protracted conflict over the disputed region. In April of last year, at least 200 people from both sides were killed as sporadic violence flared into the worst clashes in decades over the region.

A Russian-brokered cease-fire ended four days of fierce fighting at that time, but attempts to relaunch the stalled peace process since then have failed.

Nagorno-Karabakh is officially part of Azerbaijan, but Armenia-backed separatists seized control of the mainly ethnic-Armenian-populated region during the early 1990s in a war that killed some 30,000 people.

Diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict during the last 25 years have brought little progress.

Based on reporting by AFP and Reuters

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