

Why Are There No Armenians In Nagorno-Karabakh?

Fact-Finding Report Summary



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Cover Image:

The abandoned main city of Karabakh after the military operations in September 2023.

Photo © ICRC, October 2023

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Introduction

This report examines the situation for ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh¹ for the period starting with the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 and through the Azerbaijani military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 and its aftermath. It is an initial summary with a full, extended report to be released later. Through an international fact-finding effort that included hundreds of witness interviews and open-source data, the analysis aims to answer why there are no ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh as of May 2024. It documents how people in Nagorno-Karabakh were intentionally subjected to regular attacks, intimidation, deprivation of basic rights and adequate living conditions, and forced displacement. The evidence demonstrates that the Azerbaijani state acted upon a comprehensive, methodically implemented strategy to empty Nagorno-Karabakh of its ethnic Armenian population and historical and cultural presence.

This report demonstrates why, at a time when violent conflicts around the world are on the rise,² there should be attention focused on the plight of ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. It serves as a record of their experiences while also aiming to strengthen awareness of the documented facts. This is critical in laying the groundwork for future accountability efforts and feeds into global accountability efforts that envision a just society for all.

The observed events happened against the backdrop of a long-lasting dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh that culminated in an armed conflict lasting for 44 days in 2020. The first armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in the early 1990s ended with a cease-fire agreement and the ethnic Armenian authorities controlling the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and seven adjacent territories of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic.³ There was international consensus that the dispute should be settled peacefully in the framework of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group,⁴ based

on the United Nations (UN) and OSCE principles of non-use of force, territorial integrity, and the equal rights and self-determination of peoples as enshrined in the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act (1975).⁵ Nevertheless, the war that ended on May 12, 1994, with a ceasefire agreement between Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, was followed by stagnant negotiations, periodic clashes, and antagonism.

On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh that ended after six weeks with a ceasefire brokered by Russia. On November 9, 2020, the governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia signed a trilateral statement that ended the fighting and established Azerbaijani control over the parts of Nagorno-Karabakh it captured during the offensive, and seven adjacent territories.⁶ As a result, around 30,000 ethnic Armenians were displaced from those areas, and have not been allowed to return. Russian peacekeepers were stationed in the parts that remained under the control of local Nagorno-Karabakh authorities.⁷ Around 120,000 ethnic Armenians remained in those areas, which were connected to the Republic of Armenia through the Lachin Corridor.⁸ All goods and services flowed into Nagorno-Karabakh through this corridor. It was in this environment that the events discussed in this report took place.

Methodology

The summary report presents the primary findings and the conclusions based on them in a concise manner, incorporating illustrative pieces of evidence. The extended version, to be published at a later date, will provide more detailed analysis of developments in Nagorno-Karabakh during the period under review, including documentation of specific violations.

The findings are based on a vast amount of primary and secondary information gathered by a fact-finding mission carried out during the period from November 2023 through May 2024. First, the mission held in-depth interviews with more than 330 victims

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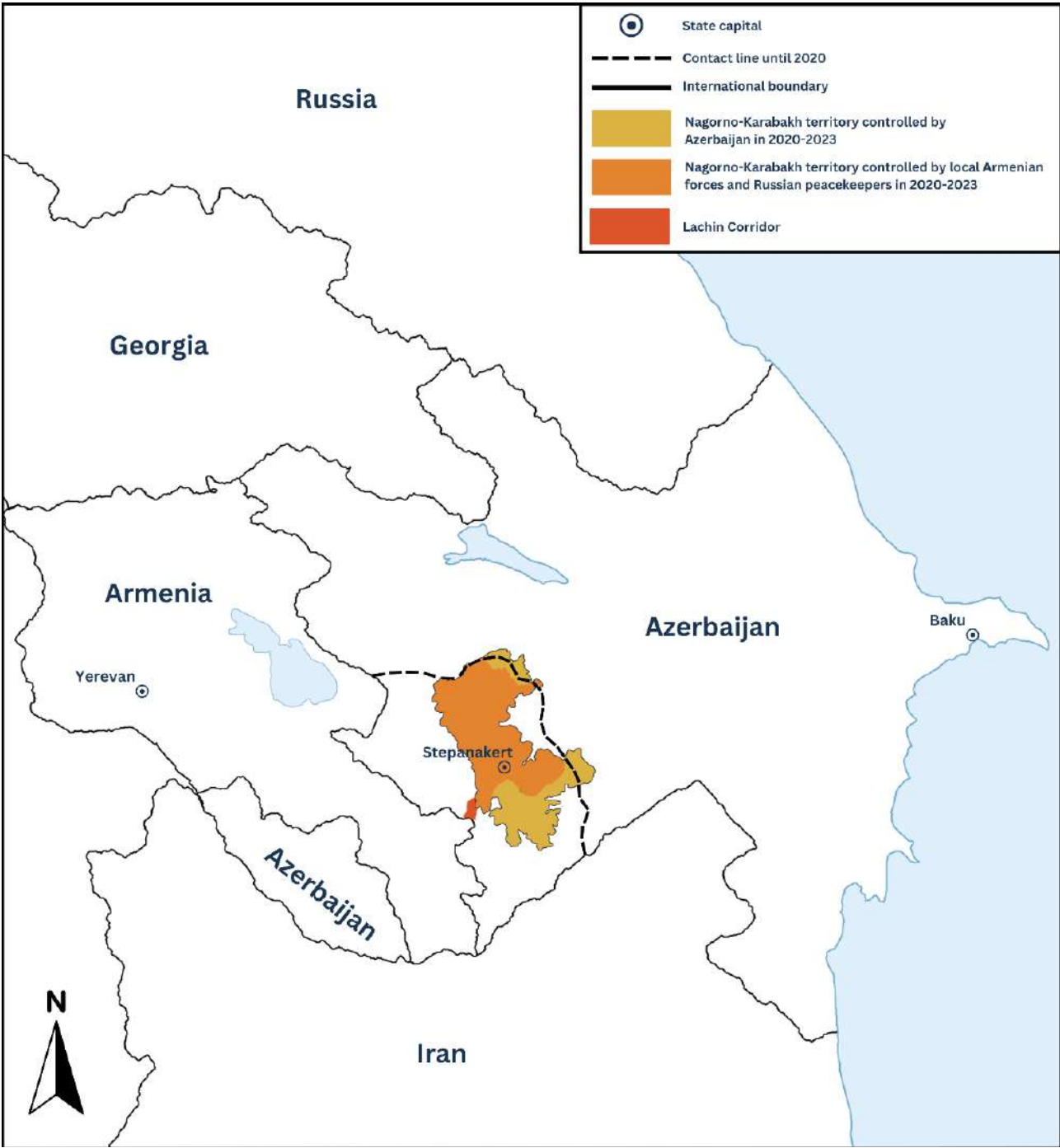


Figure 1. A map of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding areas.

and witnesses displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh now residing in Armenia. Here, the data-collection process prioritized capturing a broad range of experiences, featuring an initial screening process and a snowball-sampling strategy designed to reach out to people in varying circumstances. As a result, residents of 71 communities⁹ across Nagorno-Karabakh were interviewed, out of 107 Nagorno-Karabakh communities where Armenians lived as of August 2023. These strategies ensured diversity in age, gender, household composition, types of experienced violence, types of encounters with different actors (e.g., peacekeepers, Azerbaijani forces), and types of movements (e.g., evacuation routes). The mission adhered to the “do no harm” standard and paid particular attention to not putting the interviewees in vulnerable positions. Accordingly, the report and summary use pseudonyms to maintain their confidentiality. Second, the data from the interviews were triangulated with verified open-access sources, including satellite imagery, videos, photographs, official documents, news reports, and social media posts. The fact-finding mission uses the findings from the collected data to make conclusions based on the “reasonable grounds” standard of proof.¹⁰

Legal Framework

The fact-finding mission applied the principles of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocols, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954), and Additional Protocols, as well as customary international humanitarian law (IHL) in the data-analysis process, considering that the events took place during an international armed conflict. In addition to all customary norms, the principles of international human rights law (IHRL) and applicable regional human rights law (specifically, the European Convention on Human Rights [ECHR]) were applied.

Particular attention was paid to the UN human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on

the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED).

In the analysis of the gathered evidence, the fact-finding team also applied international criminal law, specifically precedents of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), the International Criminal Court (ICC), the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (CPPCG), as well as the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court to evaluate illegal actions, focusing on crimes against humanity. In addition, UN official documents, including the Report of the Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780, were used as a point of reference in the light of their assessment of the elements and context of “ethnic cleansing.”¹¹

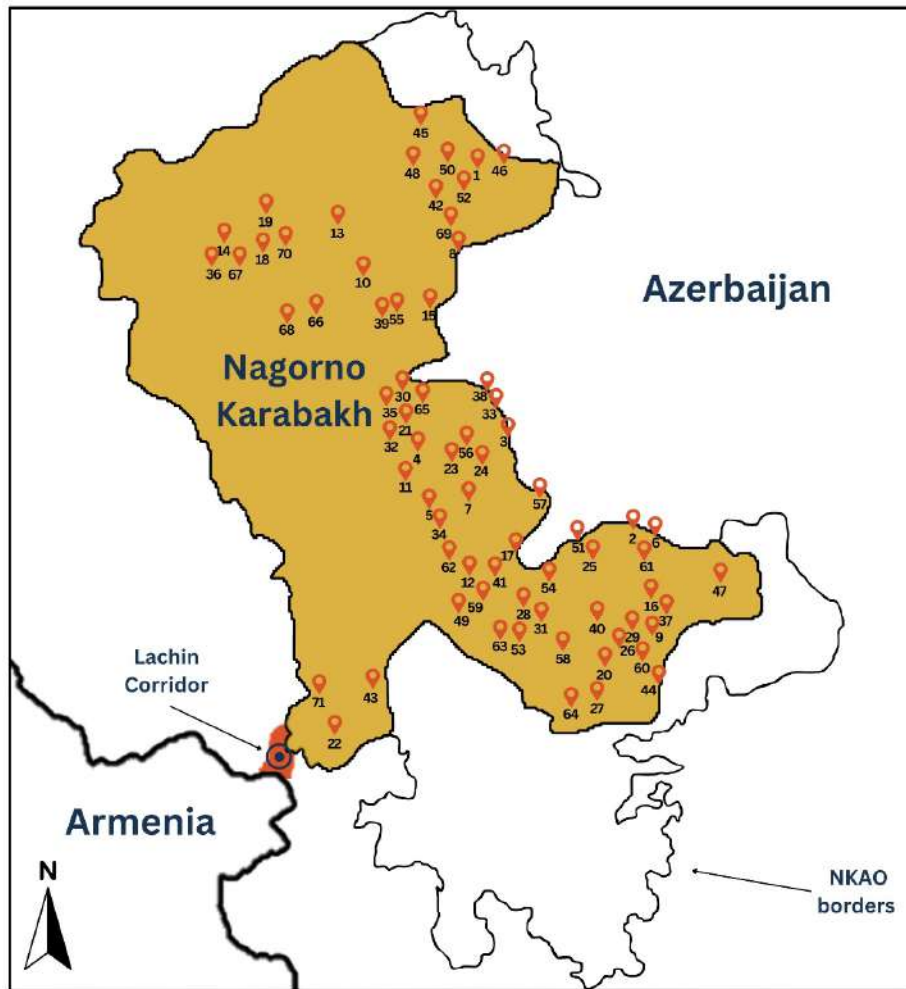
Findings

The discussion of findings is presented in three chronological sections: the period between the ceasefire statement and the blockade; the duration of the blockade; and the military attack, forced displacement, and aftermath.

From ceasefire to blockade: Nagorno-Karabakh after November 9, 2020

The 44-day war was a traumatic experience for the people of Nagorno-Karabakh. The devastation, displacement, and loss of life exacerbated a preexisting, overarching sense of fear of Azerbaijan among residents. Recollections of extrajudicial killings, torture, and abductions of civilians by servicemen of the Azerbaijani armed forces¹² were a recurring

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- | | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Aghabekalanj / Aghabekalenj | 25. Kaghartsi | 49. Mkhitarashen / Mkhitarikend |
| 2. Ashan | 26. Karahunj | 50. Mokhratagh |
| 3. Askeran | 27. Karmir Shuka | 51. Myurishen |
| 4. Astghashen / Dashbulagh | 28. Karmirgyugh | 52. Nerkin Horatagh |
| 5. Aygestan / Balluja | 29. Kert | 53. Nerkin Sznok |
| 6. Berdashen / Ghzghala | 30. Khachen / Seydishen | 54. Nngi |
| 7. Berkadzor / Hasanabad | 31. Khachmach | 55. Nor Ghazanchi / Srkhavend |
| 8. Chankatagh / Jaynatagh | 32. Khantsk | 56. Noragyugh |
| 9. Chartar | 33. Khnapat / Khanabad | 57. Sarnaghbyur / Aghbulagh |
| 10. Chldran | 34. Khnatsakh | 58. Sarushen |
| 11. Dahrav | 35. Khndzristan | 59. Shosh / Shushikend |
| 12. Karashen / Dashushen | 36. Khnkavan / Khnkatala | 60. Sos |
| 13. Drmbon | 37. Khnushinak | 61. Spitakashen |
| 14. Getavan | 38. Khramort | 62. Stepanakert |
| 15. Ghazanchi | 39. Kichan | 63. Sznok |
| 16. Gishi | 40. Kolkhozashen / Mushadishen | 64. Taghavard |
| 17. Harav | 41. Krasni | 65. Tsaghkashat / Ghshlagh |
| 18. Harutyunagomer | 42. Kusapat / Kasapet | 66. Tsmakahogh |
| 19. Haterk | 43. Lisagor / Turshsu | 67. Vaghuhas |
| 20. Herher | 44. Machkalashen | 68. Vank / Vanklu |
| 21. Hilis | 45. Maghavuz | 69. Vardadzor / Gyulatagh |
| 22. Hinshen / Kirov | 46. Martakert | 70. Verin Horatagh |
| 23. Hovsepavan (founded in 1989) | 47. Martuni | 71. Yeghtsahogh |
| 24. Ivanyan / Khojalu | 48. Mets Shen | |

Figure 2. A map of Nagorno-Karabakh territories that remained under the control of local Armenian authorities after the war in 2020. The 71 communities where the interviewees used to live before the displacement in 2023 are marked.

theme in the in-depth interviews, including against elderly people and people with disabilities. Many of the interviewees stated how scared they were to have encounters with Azerbaijani servicemen. The possibility of coming across them triggered fears of being killed, tortured, or kidnapped.

For instance, a woman from Drakhtik village, who was stopped by Azerbaijani soldiers when fleeing to Armenia with her family in September 2023, recalled how she was afraid that her family members could be abducted or hurt since such acts had been commonplace during the war in 2020.¹³ Another woman stated that her father, a civilian, had been taken as a prisoner by Azerbaijani forces during the armed conflict and tortured, making it difficult for her to imagine a normal life under conditions imposed by Azerbaijan.¹⁴ This prevalent sense of insecurity was validated in the postwar period by regular shootings and acts of intimidation by the Azerbaijani armed forces.

Attacks on and intimidation of civilian populations

Interviews with people who lived in communities near Azerbaijani military outposts show a consistent pattern of intimidation and attacks on civilians by Azerbaijani servicemen in the form of shooting at residential areas, disrupting agricultural work and infrastructure repairment activities, and threatening people to leave their homes. For instance, in October 2021, a tractor driver from Martakert was killed by the Azerbaijani armed forces when carrying out agricultural work in the presence of a Russian peacekeeper.¹⁵ The following month, ethnic Armenian civilians were targeted by gunfire when repairing a water pipe.¹⁶ One of them was killed, and three others were hospitalized with injuries. Another civilian (from Chartar) was killed by the Azerbaijani military in December 2021 while grazing his cattle.¹⁷ The following quotes from the gathered interviews are indicative of the overall situation observed by the locals:

There were cases when they [Azerbaijani servicemen] shot at houses, and windows were broken. They shot at me three times when I was outside in the yard, but the bullet hit somewhere else. These cases happened in 2021 and 2022.¹⁸

The Azerbaijanis would shoot at our houses, at farmers working on the land, at tractors. They wouldn't let us cultivate the land and get some harvest. They were trying to scare us, saying that those were their lands and we should get out. In peaceful times, after the 2020 armed conflict, they would shoot at the walls of residential houses.¹⁹

Intimidation also took the form of psychological harassment. The road to the city of Shushi, which had recently changed hands to Azerbaijan, went through the Armenian villages of Karmir Shuka, Sarushen, and Mkhitarashen. As a result, ethnic Armenian civilians living in those communities often encountered Azerbaijani servicemen. A resident of Mkhitarashen, speaking about a similar situation, noted: “Every time they passed by, [the Azerbaijani soldiers] would show the gesture of cutting the throat or other aggressive gestures, particularly to the children whose road to school was the same [one as] they used.”²⁰

These stories are corroborated by open-source data, including social media posts, that the fact-finding mission has authenticated.²¹ In addition, the same patterns have been identified by other documentation projects.²² These regular shootings and acts of intimidation by Azerbaijani servicemen led to widespread fear among civilians, a deprivation of their livelihood, and internal or external displacement.

Cutting off the pipeline

A notable development in this period was the disruption of the supply of natural gas to Nagorno-Karabakh. On March 8, 2022, a section of the only gas pipeline from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh was

damaged, in territory under Azerbaijani control. There were consistently frigid temperatures during this period of time,²³ and people reported having trouble heating their homes. Many of them had to switch to electric heating systems, overloading the electricity supply infrastructure and causing power outages that further reduced the availability of heating.²⁴ The pipeline was restored after 11 days, on March 18, but was cut off again for another week a few days later, during which time Azerbaijani authorities installed a shut-off valve on it. The valve was then used to cut off the supply of gas to Nagorno-Karabakh at least 10 times before the pipeline was shut down completely in March 2023.

The Russian peacekeepers

These regular acts of intimidation and violence, including the killing of civilians, took place in the presence of the Russian peacekeeping force. The interviewed victims and witnesses stated that the peacekeepers often did not prevent or stop violations by Azerbaijani servicemen. As a resident of Kichan village, near the line of contact, states:

Whenever we went to work in the orchard, they would start shooting at the orchards from Azerbaijani positions...when we appealed to Russians they wouldn't take any action. There were even cases when the Russians themselves wouldn't let us work in the orchard, saying that the Azerbaijanis wouldn't allow it.²⁵

This ineffectiveness became especially evident in spring 2022, when Khramort, Khnapat, and Parukh villages were shelled by the Azerbaijani armed forces, and their residents had to be evacuated.²⁶ Eventually, Parukh and nearby areas were captured by Azerbaijan, and residents were forced to resettle in other communities. Similar attacks were carried out in July and August 2022.²⁷

The blockade

On December 12, 2022, the Lachin Corridor, the exclusive road through which goods, people, and fuel entered Nagorno-Karabakh from the outside world, was blocked by a group of Azerbaijani civilians identifying as “environmental activists.” Multiple sources have verified that the activists were directly linked with the Azerbaijani government.²⁸ The blockade by the government-sanctioned activists suddenly ceased in April 2023, at the same time that Azerbaijan established a mandatory checkpoint on the Hakari Bridge, located along the Lachin Corridor. The checkpoint was used to implement an almost total prohibition on the free movement of people and cargo to and from Nagorno-Karabakh, trapping its residents inside the territory, in violation of the November 9 Trilateral Statement and the provisional measures indicated by the order of February 22, 2023, of the International Court of Justice (ICJ).²⁹ The blockade was accompanied by the regular cutting of the supply of gas and electricity, as well as disrupting lines of communication, such as telephone landlines, cellular signals, and internet. Azerbaijani state actors regularly shut down the supply of gas to Nagorno-Karabakh during the first four months of the blockade. In March 2023, they completely and permanently shut down all gas supplies.³⁰ On January 9, 2023, the high-voltage cable from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh, the main source of electricity, was damaged in the territory of the Lachin Corridor. Azerbaijani officials did not allow any repair work on it, and the supply of electricity was never restored. Consequently the population had to rely solely on hydropower plants, which put a particularly heavy burden on the Sarsang Reservoir and led to the overconsumption of already-scarce water resources.³¹

Incrementally, the blockade became more severe. Initially, Russian peacekeepers and the representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were allowed to pass through the checkpoint on the Lachin Corridor to transport people and supplies. In June 2023, Azerbaijan fully blocked the transfer of humanitarian goods both by the ICRC

and Russian peacekeepers.³² Obstructing the transfer of medical supplies and patients in critical condition became more regular as well. On July 25, 2023, the ICRC stated:

*The civilian population is now facing a lack of life-saving medication and essentials...Fruits, vegetables, and bread are increasingly scarce and costly, while some other food items such as dairy products...fish, and chicken are not available. The last time the ICRC was allowed to bring medical items and essential food items into the area was several weeks ago.*³³

As a result, throughout the more than nine months of the blockade, the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh deteriorated severely, depriving its population of basic standards of living and violating their fundamental rights.

A humanitarian crisis sets in

The collected primary information shows that empty shelves in stores, paralyzed transportation, daily power cuts, isolated rural communities, and adults refraining from eating to save food for children became common features of the living conditions in Nagorno-Karabakh. Reportedly, 90 percent of the food sold in Nagorno-Karabakh had been imported from Armenia;³⁴ hence, there was an extreme shortage of food and basic supplies shortly after the blockade had started. As a resident of Mkhitarashen states:

*The shops were generally completely emptied within a week or two during the blockade. It was very difficult to get flour, there was no sugar at all. It was very difficult, especially in the village, because you had to go to the city to buy things, and there was no transport or fuel at all.*³⁵

Therefore, a month after the blockade had started, the local authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh had to ration food and basic supplies.

For example, a lecturer at the Stepanakert State

Medical College recalls: “There were children from the regions that could not come to class. There were cases when children came to class and fainted due to malnutrition.”³⁶ Hranush from Khnapat stated: “We stood in line for bread for hours, even our neighbor’s son fainted in the line.”³⁷ Such incidents were also registered by authenticated open-source data.³⁸ The situation was especially difficult for people in vulnerable conditions, such as children, pregnant women, the elderly, people with medical conditions, and persons with disabilities. As reported by the Nagorno-Karabakh Ministry of Health, due to malnutrition, the shortage of vitamins, and constant stress, the number of miscarriages nearly tripled during the period of the blockade. The level of anemia among pregnant women under medical supervision increased to around 90 percent. In the seven months from January through July 2023, the mortality rate from acute and chronic heart failures increased by 66 percent, from acute myocardial infarction and stroke by 20.8 percent and 8.8 percent, respectively. Similarly, over the course of seven months, the number of deaths caused by malignant neoplasms increased by 15.9 percent.³⁹ These patterns were also identified from the collected interviews. Ashkhen from Stepanakert stated:

*I was pregnant during the blockade. The food was limited, there was no medicine or vitamins. In the fifth month of my pregnancy, I became anemic, and I was fainting periodically...I tried to walk to the hospital. The distance was around 1.5 kilometers, but I was feeling very sick. People were fainting while walking in the street. Since I was starving for a long time—there was not enough food, and I could not stand it—I had more cases of fainting.*⁴⁰

The blockade also led to an acute shortage of medicine and hygiene products. Many of the interviewees informed the fact-finding mission that they or their relatives had to skip taking doses of their medicine in an attempt to ration. The interviews uncovered that the negative impact of the blockade on children’s health was especially acute.

During the blockade my child was hospitalized twice. Doctors prescribed pills but they were lacking from the pharmacies...Hygiene supplies were completely lacking. I stopped using diapers for the child as they were lacking.⁴¹

Trapped and captured

Considering the severely limited capacities of the medical infrastructure in Nagorno-Karabakh, many patients had to be transferred to Armenia for treatment. Azerbaijani authorities only allowed passage to those who were accompanied by the ICRC or Russian peacekeepers. However, there were regular delays even in those cases. As a result, many patients were deprived of proper and timely treatment. A health care professional from the Republican Medical Center in Stepanakert recalls:

The situation in the oncology building [of the Republican Medical Center] was especially difficult. There were patients whose treatment was delayed. There were 450 patients enrolled to be transferred to the RA for diagnosis. The Red Cross transported patients once or at most twice a week, eight or ten people each. There was an additional problem with having one caregiver accompanying each patient. The overall process was very long and complicated. Later, patients were transported in 18-seater cars, accompanied by caregivers. There were cases when we had to send them without companions. Delay of conducting certain examinations or interferences lead to deterioration of the patients' health.⁴²

The Azerbaijani authorities regularly introduced new conditions on providing permission to transfer patients. On several occasions, they blocked any movement through the Lachin Corridor. For example, on June 15, 2023, they completely banned all types of humanitarian transportation in both directions, including the transfer of patients by ICRC and Russian peacekeepers. On the same day, the already-agreed passage of 25 patients and their companions was prohibited at the checkpoint on the Hakari Bridge by

the Azerbaijani authorities. There were cases when these restrictions had fatal consequences. A resident of Stepanakert recalled that her father-in-law had a stomach tumor and needed immediate treatment: "We applied to the ICRC for his transfer...There were many patients waiting for their turn. He died before his turn came."⁴³

Many residents, including those in need of medical assistance, were hesitant to cross the checkpoint due to the fear of being abducted. This concern was a result of the Azerbaijani authorities arresting five civilians from Nagorno-Karabakh within a period of 30 days in July and August 2023.⁴⁴ Among them was Vagif Khachatryan, a 68-year-old resident from Stepanakert, was being transported by the ICRC to receive treatment in Armenia in July 2023, when he was arrested and detained at the border.⁴⁵ In reference to this arrest, Mariam from Stepanakert shared the security concerns she had had with the fact-finding mission:

I got thrombosis during pregnancy. It was about the end of July, and I faced a medication problem. There was no vascular specialist in the hospital treating pregnant women. I applied for the transfer to Armenia, but there was a fear as not much time had passed since the capture of Vagif Khachatryan. At the end of August, I was transferred to Armenia.⁴⁶

Another interviewee stated:

We were thinking of going to Yerevan for the medical treatment of our sons, but at that time a person [Vagif Khachatryan] was caught at the checkpoint (he was accompanied by his daughter), and we were afraid and decided to go as soon as the road opened.⁴⁷

In addition to creating the blockade, Azerbaijan took deliberate measures to instill a sense of insecurity in Nagorno-Karabakh. The shootings near the line of contact continued, targeting people carrying out agricultural work, which was needed for self-sustenance during the blockade.⁴⁸ Interviewees shared how they had developed a sense of impending danger. Narine from Martakert stated:

We had already started sleeping in our clothes at night and paying attention to the sounds in order to evacuate quickly. Sometimes I stayed awake like on duty to watch out if war broke out. We were already tired of this life, living in constant fear... I remember that while working at the shop, I would ask the Russian peacekeepers whether we could feel calm and protected. In response, they stated that even they did not feel safe.⁴⁹

In this regard, a resident of Saralanj told the fact-finding mission, “The Azerbaijanis did everything for us to become disappointed with everything, tired of everything.”⁵⁰

Speech and conduct of Azerbaijani officials

Amid these developments, the Azerbaijani government made explicit threats, demonstrating its intent to dismantle the Nagorno-Karabakh government once and for all. Ilham Aliyev, the president of Azerbaijan, stated that the people of Nagorno-Karabakh either had to submit to Azerbaijani control “or leave.”⁵¹ On May 28, 2023, Aliyev threatened Nagorno-Karabakh authorities with repercussions should they not capitulate to Azerbaijan:

Therefore, there is only one option left—to abide by the laws of Azerbaijan, be a loyal and decent citizen of Azerbaijan, throw the false state attributes in the trash...everyone knows perfectly well that we have all the means to carry out any operation in that region today. Therefore, the “parliament” should be dissolved, the element calling himself “president” should surrender, and all “ministers,” “deputies,” and others should give up their positions. Only in that case can a concession be made to them... Either they will bend their necks and come themselves or things will develop differently now.⁵²

In June 2023, Caliber.Az Media, which is reportedly associated with the Defense Ministry of Azerbaijan,⁵³ published a video report on the possible “reintegration” process of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh with the title, “even a wild cat can be tamed.”⁵⁴ In reference to this video, one of the interviewees stated: “In one of the videos, we were compared to a wild cat in a cage, and the cat was kept in the cage for a long time until the wildness passed.”⁵⁵

The attack, displacement, and aftermath

The blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh lasted nine months. On September 19, 2023, the Azerbaijani armed forces launched a military operation on Armenian-populated territory. The one-day offensive resulted in 229 deaths, among them 34 civilians, 5 of whom were children. Two hundred and forty-four were wounded, including 31 civilians, 10 of whom were children. According to Armenian government forensic specialists, 14 mutilated bodies were identified, with some featuring dismemberment and infliction of cuts in the flesh of corpses. As of June 2024, there were 15 missing persons, including 5 civilians.⁵⁶

Armenians flee their homes

Thousands of people in Stepanakert and nearby areas went to the Russian base located at the city airport to be evacuated.⁵⁷ People in other residential areas fled their homes after witnessing shelling of their communities. Arman from Vank village recounted in his interview that on September 19, 2023, Azerbaijani forces fired throughout the day, resulting in the death of his brother and a minor child by a shell in the village.⁵⁸ Another resident of Vank confirmed that there were civilian deaths and injuries. She specified that due to the bombardment, the priest of the village and all four members of the family hosted by him, including two minors, were injured. One of the children died on the way to the hospital, while the other child and the mother sustained serious injuries.⁵⁹

Similar testimonies were given by people from other communities in Nagorno-Karabakh, including Nerkin Horatagh, Sarnaghbyur, Karmir Shuka, Tchankatagh, Martuni, Ghazanchi, Shosh, Murishen, and Sznek. A resident of Saranghbyur recounted how members of her family were killed or wounded in the shelling:

I said, “kids, don’t be afraid, let’s pray.” And there was an explosion at that very moment. I turned around and saw that my son and my mom were wounded on their heads. My son’s brain was out... Several projectiles were dropped on us in those few minutes. Right before my eyes, my son was hit, 15 years old, and two other smaller children. Both were boys, 10 and 11 years old. My mom died there. The next projectile killed my father-in-law.”⁶⁰

Thousands of Nagorno-Karabakh residents found refuge in the capital of Stepanakert and adjacent areas for days in the immediate aftermath of the military operation. The overwhelming majority of them were not able to return to their habitual place of residence, not even to pick up personal belongings. Such practice demonstrates that there was a concerted effort by Azerbaijan to remove the local population and prevent them from returning to their homes. Many of those who stayed in the territories that had fallen under Azerbaijani control, mostly women, elderly people, and persons with disabilities, were transferred by Azerbaijani servicemen to military bases and remained in Azerbaijani custody for up to 10 days. Some of them, including heavily wounded civilians, persons with disabilities, and women, reported ill-treatment, including physical abuse and degrading treatment.⁶¹ Most of the civilians did not have an opportunity to return home after their release and had to flee to Armenia.

Moreover, Azerbaijani officials have acknowledged the detention of 17 ethnic Armenians during the attack of September 19, 2023, and its immediate aftermath.⁶² Only one of them was released, on December 13, 2023.⁶³ Eight of them are former high-ranking officials

of Nagorno-Karabakh.⁶⁴ While there is publicly available information about the charges against 9⁶⁵ of the 16 remaining detainees, there is no information on the status of the remaining 7 persons.

Dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh under duress

On the same day as the military operation by Azerbaijani forces on September 19, the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Azerbaijan issued a statement demanding that all Armenian military formations surrender and hand over their weapons, and that local government bodies dissolve, threatening to continue “the antiterror measures until the end.”⁶⁶

The next day, the Nagorno-Karabakh Defense Army agreed to a ceasefire brokered by Russian peacekeepers, agreeing for all Armenian self-defense forces in the region to completely disarm and to leave their military posts, including by handing over all artillery and munitions to the Russian troops. The then-president of Nagorno-Karabakh, Samvel Shahramanyan, stated that they had no choice but to agree to this for the sake of “physical safety of the population.”⁶⁷

Shortly thereafter, on September 28, as a part of the implementation of demands from Azerbaijani authorities, the president of Nagorno-Karabakh announced that he had signed an order dissolving all state institution, effective January 1, 2024.⁶⁸

The mass exodus to Armenia

Under these circumstances, the population of Nagorno-Karabakh fled to Armenia for safety. On the day of the military attack on September 19, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense announced: “In order to ensure the evacuation of the population from the dangerous area, humanitarian corridors and reception points were established on the Lachin road and in other directions.”⁶⁹ However, the interviewees did

not mention any identifiable humanitarian corridors in any direction. Moreover, many of them stated that their movement had been hampered by Azerbaijani armed forces shelling and cutting off roads connecting different communities with each other, exacerbating the feeling of impending danger among the residents of those communities.

The combination of depleted resources and a sense of terror led to tragic incidents during the displacement. On September 25, 2023, at around 19:00, there was an explosion at a warehouse in the Askeran region, where around 1,000 people were gathered, having rushed there in panic to get fuel to transport their families to Armenia. A total of 290 patients with various degrees of burns were admitted to different medical centers, which were struggling to provide proper treatment due to the lack of medicine, including burn medicine and other supplies such as bandages and bed linen. As a health practitioner from the Republican Medical Center recalls:

It was an indescribably hard period. People were burned, naked. The extent and level of burns were extensive. There was no place on the body where we could make an injection. There were only 45 staff members in the hospital, and it was objectively impossible to provide assistance to a large number of people under such conditions, but we managed to provide medical assistance to everyone with great difficulty. There was an extreme need for specialists as only 15 out of 45 were doctors. Nineteen deaths from burns were recorded in one day. Next day we received around 50 patients from Arevik Medical Center. The scene in the hospital was terrible, it was very difficult for the staff to get over. Our staff was working in an emergency mode, starting from September 19, we did not even have time to eat properly for several days. Many of the employees themselves had health problems, losses in their own families.⁷⁰

Another medical worker said:

I can't explain what it was, I thought a movie was being made about the First World War, people were lying in the corridors, people knew you, you didn't know them, they were so burned. As far as I know, 75 percent of those burned died.⁷¹

It was later reported that 220 people died from the explosion.⁷²

In a period of several days, more than 100,000 people fled Nagorno-Karabakh using a single road—the Lachin Corridor—causing heavy congestion. It was a journey full of suffering, anxiety, and intimidation for many people. Sixty-nine people died on the road to Armenia.⁷³ Armine from Stepanakert recounted witnessing an elderly person die on the road:

In the car next to ours, a grandfather died. We knew it from the voices: they were screaming “grandpa, grandpa.” There were also four- to five-year-old children and a pregnant woman in their car. They brought a blanket from another car, took out the corpse, wrapped it in the blanket, and put it in the trunk.⁷⁴

Petros from Chartar told the fact-finding mission that his grandfather's health conditions deteriorated on the road, and he passed away near the Azerbaijani checkpoint. He stated:

Before reaching the bridge, my grandfather put his head on my mother's shoulder. Already at the Hakari Bridge, my mother realized that my grandfather had died, but she did not say anything so that the people on the bus would not be afraid.⁷⁵

The interviews also show that there were regular cases of degrading treatment by Azerbaijani servicemen. As Davit from Astghashen recalls: “They [Azerbaijanis] were swearing at people, saying bad things, mocking, telling us to “go away.”⁷⁶ In addition, people were afraid that they could be captured when crossing

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Traffic congestion on the Lachin Corridor in September 2023 (Photo © Photolure Agency, September 2023).

the checkpoint, considering the previous common practice of arbitrary detention of civilians.

As of October 2023, only several dozen people reportedly remained in Nagorno-Karabakh. By April 2024, around 50 of them had been transferred to Armenia via the ICRC upon their request.⁷⁷ One of the interviewees who had attempted to stay in Nagorno-Karabakh told the fact-finding mission:

Although it happened once, on September 23, that they caught me on the road, twisted my arms, and took me to their superiors... When they took me away they asked “why aren’t you moving out of here?” I explained: it’s my house, it’s my land; where can I go... Then there were other times when they came to our house. I was not at home. Papa was told to leave here...the Red Cross called us twice to take us out of Karabakh. I said no. We agreed for the third time...We did the right thing...The circumstances were such that it was necessary to leave.”⁷⁸

Erasing Nagorno-Karabakh

For the Azerbaijani government, the issue was “resolved.”⁷⁹ On March 18, 2024, Aliyev made a boastful speech from depopulated Stepanakert, claiming that justice had been restored.⁸⁰ He shared a segment of that speech on the social media platform X with the caption, “The Novruz bonfire is also doing the final cleansing.”⁸¹

In addition to these narratives, Baku continued erasing evidence of Armenian communities, culture, and heritage from Nagorno-Karabakh. The satellite imagery acquired by the fact-finding mission, as well as those shared by secondary sources, shows the destruction of Armenian cemeteries, churches, and residential areas. The previously Armenian-populated Karin Tak village (see figure 3) was razed to the ground.⁸² Another striking example of this policy of erasure is the destruction of the 18th-century

cemetery of Sghnakh. Azerbaijan bulldozed the area, purportedly for road construction, as reported by the Caucasus Heritage Watch.⁸³

Residential areas in Stepanakert were also impacted by this policy. There is evidence of damaging private property. Figure 5 shows how belongings inside residential apartments were thrown outside, erasing the traces of people that used to live there.

These developments indicate continuity in the actions of the Azerbaijani state to eliminate all traces of Armenian presence and heritage from Nagorno-Karabakh. They are consistent with the measures and narratives that Aliyev’s government had used immediately after the 2020 armed conflict, in violation of the ICJ order of December 7, 2021.⁸⁴ An illustrative example of this disposition was Aliyev’s statement in March 2021 during his trip to Hadrut, a formerly Armenian-populated town that was captured by Azerbaijan four months earlier. Standing at the 12th-century Armenian Holy Mother of God Church, he said: “All these inscriptions are fake—they were written later. They have created a false history for themselves in our ancient lands.”⁸⁵ On another occasion, he claimed: “Their [Armenian] history, their past, their statehood, and their mythology are nothing but fake.”⁸⁶ Then the Azerbaijani government took measures to erase the physical and cultural presence of ethnic Armenians from the territories under its control.

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Figure 3. Karin Tak village before and after its demolition.



Figure 4. Sghnakh Cemetery before and after the demolition.



Figure 5. Belongings in Stepanakert apartments are thrown outside.

Conclusion

The fact-finding mission has documented multiple cases of gross human rights violations, breaches of international humanitarian law and international criminal law, as well as serious breaches of peremptory norms of international law by Azerbaijani officials during the events spanning from 2020 to May 2024. There is substantial evidence of violations of the rights to life, health, food, freedom of movement, adequate standards of living, liberty and personal integrity, the right to be free from torture and other ill-treatment, right to a fair trial, education, property, as well as cultural rights.

An analysis of the actions and rhetoric of Azerbaijani authorities in conjunction with the lived experiences of the ethnic Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh provides reasonable grounds to conclude that their forced displacement was intentional. The evidence suggests a coordinated, long-term plan aimed at ridding Nagorno-Karabakh of its ethnic Armenian population. This policy was achieved through regular actions that constitute gross violations of human rights, international humanitarian law, and international criminal law. In a gradual process and methodical manner, the Azerbaijani state imposed conditions of life designed to either bring about the destruction of the Armenian population over time, or render it impossible for them to stay and survive. The official narrative from Azerbaijani officials immediately following displacement that the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh is “resolved” and “justice is restored” further point to intentionality. Persistent defiance of international norms and continued violations despite international condemnations also indicate the deliberate intent of the Azerbaijani government to displace the Armenian population.

Accordingly, the documented actions of Azerbaijan meet the criteria for ethnic cleansing as understood in the context of the former Yugoslavia conflict, inflicting it through means of extrajudicial executions, torture, arbitrary arrests and detention, restrictions on the access to food and life-saving medication, forcible removal, displacement and deportation of civilian population, deliberate military attacks or threats of attacks on civilians and civilian areas, and wanton destruction of property. The fact-finding mission has determined that there is sufficient evidence to conclude that these practices as well as other acts cited in this summary also constitute crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, including Article 7 (crimes against humanity), and Article 8 (war crimes), and align with the definition of deportation or forcible transfer of population.

These findings and lack of prosecution on the domestic level in Azerbaijan underscore the urgent need for international legal scrutiny and accountability, with a recommendation for referral to the ICC to ensure a thorough investigation and potential prosecution of those responsible for these egregious acts.

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Displaced people from Nagorno-Karabakh in Goris, Armenia (Photo © Avet Avetisyan, September 2023).

Endnotes

- 1 Here, the term Nagorno-Karabakh refers to the area of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO). The territories that came under the control of local Armenian authorities after the 1992–1994 war but were outside the boundaries of the former NKAO are called adjacent districts or territories. The NKAO was formed under Soviet rule as an autonomous region within the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic. It had a majority Armenian population and included several Azerbaijani communities.
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