



Humanitarian  
Aid Relief Trust

## A journey through Karabakh

*An international walk across Nagorno Karabakh reveals the strength and spirit of a country recovering from war.*



Reminders of the distant and recent past stand side by side in the mountainous landscape of Nagorno Karabakh. Ancient churches, monuments to the faith of the Armenians, who adopted Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, are interspersed with hollow, bomb-damaged buildings, stark reminders of the 400 grad missiles a day which rained down upon its capital during the war of 1991-4. This material juxtaposition, written across the landscape, is symbolic of the way in which the Armenians held onto their faith through the attempted ethnic cleansing of the 150,000 Armenian inhabitants of the region by Azerbaijan. This was the landscape across which an international group of 35 pilgrims, led by Baroness Cox and the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust staff, walked. We wanted to discover what life is like for ordinary Karabakh Armenians, to hear first hand about their experiences and to encourage and facilitate dialogue about the situation. Those we met recalled men assaulted and murdered, women raped, hostages taken and villages looted during the conflict; vivid memories of persecution which interact with very real fears about a return to war, and on-going suffering caused by political and economic isolation. However, yet more evident in the Karabakhis is a resounding sense of hope, strength and faith, manifested in a determination to develop their country and to work for peace.

Beginning in Lachin in the south-west, the group weaved its way across the entire region, flanked all the while by magnificent mountains, to arrive, 142 miles and 8 days later, in Gandzasar, a 13<sup>th</sup> century monastery in northern Karabakh. The international group included members from the United Kingdom, the United States, South Africa, Burma, Australia, France, Germany and the Netherlands, and were joined by local Armenians and patients from the Nagorno-Karabakh rehabilitation centre, a project set up by a partner of HART. The expedition was supported by an invaluable network of Armenians, who helped with everything from the organisation to the cooking and the setting up of tents. Many villages and towns we passed through along the way hosted welcoming ceremonies, with traditional music and dancing, and animated speeches, and as we walked people came out of their houses or yelled from their cars to greet us. The majority of the group camped along the way, in stunning locations ranging from a cliff above a gorge, where local villagers put on a concert of traditional music and dancing, to shaded river valleys. Washing facilities consisted of a number of rivers, into which we gratefully plunged after a day's walking in 40-degree heat, sometimes watched by unnervingly nosy cows, and once accompanied by an unwelcome water snake.

Alongside this, a smaller group was involved with photographing local Armenians, and interviewing them about their experiences of the war and their hopes for the future. The pictures and stories will be collated into a photo exhibition to be shown first in the UK and then around the world, creating a visually powerful forum to document the situation in Karabakh and to give a glimpse into the lives and hopes of ordinary Karabakh Armenians. This will contribute to a much-needed increase in understanding and awareness of Nagorno-Karabakh within the international community.

The pilgrimage was an opportunity to engage with the history and culture of the region and to understand better the Armenian perspective of the current situation of Nagorno-Karabakh. Historically and ethnically Armenian, it was during the 1920s that the area was assigned to Azerbaijan by Stalin. Armenians and Azerbaijanis lived together relatively peacefully until 1988, when the Armenians of Karabakh sought to be reunited with Armenia, as the USSR was dissolving. Azerbaijan responded with Operation Ring in spring 1991, involving the forced and violent expulsion of Armenian residents from the area. In October of the same year, Azerbaijan launched a general invasion of the region, using GRAD missiles and helicopter gunships against civilian targets. Karabakhi and Armenian forces fought back, eventually clearing Azerbaijani forces from most of Karabakh. In May 1994 a ceasefire was brokered, but a formal peace treaty has never been agreed. Nagorno-Karabakh remains at the centre of prolonged peace negotiations, which will have extensive repercussions across the Caucasus, yet the Armenians of Karabakh have little say in the negotiations that will decide their own future. Meanwhile, they feel a constant threat of invasion as Azerbaijan builds up its military, spending more on arms than Armenia's total state budget. Economic growth has been severely stunted by a trade blockade imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan, leaving over half of the population living below the poverty line, and yet few international aid organisations are working in the area. The accounts of local Armenians of the history of the region, combined with Baroness Cox's endless supply of stories from her visits to Nagorno-Karabakh, many during the war, helped us to understand the current situation on a more personal level.

We found a country with a sharp recollection of war, in which most families lost at least one member. Photographs of every soldier killed during the fighting stretch across the walls of two poignant museums in Stepanakert, one for fallen and one for missing soldiers. However, to an even greater extent, we found a country full of warm, spirited people, with ready smiles and particularly catchy folk music, who exceeded their already high reputation for hospitality. On the final night of the pilgrimage, rounds of toasting and a long speech from a local Armenian man ended with a blessing to the pilgrims, *"may you always feel at home in Karabakh"*, exemplifying the whole-hearted way in which we were welcomed into a country as friends and family. Whilst some hollow bombed out buildings are still visible, much of the region has been rebuilt, and we witnessed, as Baroness Cox said, a country which has *"created beauty from the ashes of destruction"*, from the elegant new churches which rival the beauty of their ancient counterparts, to the inspiring rehabilitation centre, which has become internationally recognised as a Centre of Excellence. Stories of loss and atrocities endured also involved accounts of bravery and hope, such as a mother whose son is missing, uncontactable in an Azeri prison, who has set up solidarity meetings between Armenian and Azeri mothers, because, as she said to us, suffering does know not nationalities. With breaches of the ceasefire having increased markedly in 2010, and Azerbaijan investing vast amounts of money in building up its military, it is clear that the region is in acute danger, and the need to increase international attention and pressure is urgent.

