

Hope and Recovery

VISIT REPORT: ARMENIA AND NAGORNO-KARABAKH (ARTSAKH)



HUMANITARIAN AID RELIEF TRUST

JUNE 2019

THE LADY COX REHABILITATION CENTRE

Now in its 21st year, the Lady Cox Rehabilitation Centre continues to expand the array of services that it offers to patients of all ages. Physiotherapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy and hydrotherapy are each available at the centre, which now employs 73 staff and treats over 1,000 patients a year.

Founder and Director of the Centre, Vardan Tadevosyan and his staff continue to break the stigma surrounding disability through exemplifying what can be achieved with training and commitment. The Centre has brought about transformational change to people with disabilities who would have otherwise been isolated and neglected.

During our visit, we met with patients who visit the centre each day from 9-5.30pm such as the young children in the autism centre. We also met with several in-patients, who suffer from some of the centre's most common disabilities, such as cerebral palsy and spinal cord injuries.

In supporting an extensive collection of patients, the centre is largely dependent on the Government of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) to provide funding for staff salaries and medicine. HART's support is equally as crucial – as the centre's only other source of financial support (the autism centre alone has secured funding from an Australian donor until 2021). HART funds crucially cover additional staff costs and pay for day trips and summer/winter camps for patients. These outings are a critical feature of the centre's efforts to integrate its patients into society, develop patient's social skills and enhance their confidence and subsequent independence. Additionally, the occupational therapies offered at the Centre are only possible through HART funding.



As one example of where your money goes:

£10 covers all food and expenses for 2 autistic children to have a day out by Lake Seven.

If you wish to donate, please visit the website and quote 'The Rehab Centre'.

We met with 8-year-old Valentine who has cerebral palsy and his mother Valentina to hear about their experience at the Centre.



Valentine with baby sister, Emily and mother, Valentina.

Valentine has attended the rehabilitation centre for the last 7 years. Born with a heart condition after his twin did not survive birth, Valentine's slow development was initially misdiagnosed by the regional doctor. When he was one year old, Valentine's mother took him to see a doctor in the state capital, Stepanakert where he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy and immediately referred to Vardan's centre.

Over the last 7 years, Valentine has made huge progress, partly due to his mother's fierce commitment to replicating all of his therapies at home.

"Valentina is the best mother. A lot of his progress is simply down to her. When he first came here, he couldn't eat. Now he feeds himself" – **Karine, Chief Therapist at the Centre**

"Thank you to all staff at this Centre. Before Valentine visits, his muscles are very stiff. He always leaves happier and more relaxed after his month at the Centre" – **Valentina, mother of Valentine**

As one example of where your money goes:

£20 can purchase a pair of crutches for a child with cerebral palsy

If you wish to donate, please visit the website and quote 'The Rehab Centre'.

We were privileged to sit down with Cohar, the Centre's Chief Doctor and the only doctor in Nagorno-Karabakh trained in disability rehabilitation. Explaining that doctors in the state are only just starting to understand the importance of rehabilitation, Cohar told us that:

"Staff from our Centre travel to regional hospitals to train doctors and nurses in rehabilitation therapy, so that more people can benefit from our knowledge" –

Cohar, Chief Doctor at the Centre

Following this, we learnt of the huge demand for the Centre's services. Constraints in funding and space mean that there is an ever-growing waiting list for admittance to the centre. Only 17% of those who need support can benefit from the services.



Mkhitar, a patient at the Centre who suffers from a spinal cord injury after being shot in the back during the War in 1991.

As one example of where your money goes:

£100 will provide 1 spinal cord injury patient with all of their necessary medical supplies for 2 months e.g. urine bags, diapers and catheters.

If you wish to donate, please visit the website and quote 'The Rehab Centre'.



22-year-old Gevorg with his 17-year-old sister Marina who stays with him at the Centre

One of 11 children and living in a remote village, 22-year-old Gevorg had never received treatment for his cerebral palsy and was isolated for most of his life. After he had spent just 6 days at the Centre, we were moved to see how Gevorg had learnt how to open his hands for the first time.



Vardan with Chief Doctor, Kohar and Chief Therapist, Karine at the Centre

"After 50 days of intensive treatment, most in-patients become independent. All of our patients are happy and don't want to go home" –
Cohar, Chief Doctor at the Centre

BACKGROUND

As the Soviet Union disintegrated towards the end of the 1980s, tensions grew within Nagorno-Karabakh, a formerly Armenian region which Stalin relocated in Azerbaijan. In 1988 violence erupted between Azeri and Armenian communities in the enclave, eventually leading to full-scale war between the two ethnic groups. By the time Russia brokered a ceasefire in 1994, the Armenians had captured sufficient territory to create a viable de facto state, which they describe as the Republic of Artsakh.

So far no nation, not even Armenia itself, has recognised Artsakh. This has left the state both contending with sporadic fighting along the conflict line and also largely unable to access international funding to support basic services such as medicine.

Our visit was therefore an encouragement to a struggling de facto country which generally feels isolated, and blockaded by hostile neighbours: Turkey to the West, and Azerbaijan to the East. HART was able to assist not only with highly symbolic humanitarian support, but also by opening paths of communication to the wider international community.

BEAUTY FROM THE ASHES

The HART team were privileged to meet with Parkev Martirosyan, the Archbishop of Stepanakert. The Archbishop lamented recent deaths and the use of artillery along the conflict line with Azerbaijan. *“Pray for peace, pray for peace”*, he exhorted. He expressed concern over the wider phenomenon of the exodus of Christians from the Middle East.

“Armenians have left Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, as have Assyrian and Greek Christians. Eighty or ninety families from Syria are living here in Artsakh- I gave them land and our church houses in Lachin.” –

Archbishop of Artsakh



The Archbishop said that he had been involved in a number of meetings over a period of 30 years with Muslim leaders from Azerbaijan. However, the last meeting was now four years ago. He remembered that during the Soviet period it was common for Muslims and Christians to live alongside each other. However there were now no Muslims living in Nagorno-Karabakh, he reported.

“We have nothing against Islam or Muslims. There are Armenians living in countries like Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Egypt.” – **Archbishop of Artsakh**

We were told that over the last century, hundreds of Churches had been destroyed and 90% of Priests were killed, more than 20,000 killed since the 1920s. Fortunately, we learnt that in the last 30 years, 90 churches and monasteries had since been built in Nagorno-Karabakh.

“That’s three churches a year. We are a strong church. Young people come to church.” – Archbishop of Artsakh

The Archbishop always asks his people to pray for Azerbaijan and Turkey.

“God, give them life. It is the devil who is your enemy, and he is using this man as his instrument.” – Archbishop of Artsakh

REMEMBERING THE FALLEN AND MISSING

The team visited the Museum of the Fallen, commemorating those who died in the 1988-1994 war in Nagorno-Karabakh. It was moving to see the many thousands of photographs, mostly of young men, who had died in the war, and the primitive weapons with which they had fought.

Then came the Museum of the Missing, commemorating 773 Armenians (including 250 soldiers) who had gone missing during the war. Some had been seen as recently as 2011, and it is thought that a number are still in prison in Azerbaijan.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has so far failed to trace the missing, insisting that it is ‘neutral’ and cannot push enquires beyond a certain point. Baroness Cox intends to write to the ICRC to encourage them to renew the search.

Azerbaijan maintains that it has 4995 people missing on its side. The Armenians assert that many of these died in the war, and that the figure is touted about as an encouragement to Azeris to invade Nagorno-Karabakh in order to search for lost comrades and family members.

ARMENOPHOBIA

The frequency and intensity of this type of Azeri propaganda has caused a sharp increase of Armenophobia in the region. Exacerbating existing tensions, high profile political Azeri leaders have contributed to the rising level of hatred that glorifies violence against Armenians.

“As the situation becomes tense on the frontline, citizens wishing to go to war appeal to the Defence Ministry. It arises from our people’s hatred for the enemy [Armenians] and wishes to liberate our lands.” – Zakir Hasanov, Minister of Defence for Azerbaijan

Foreign Minister of Nagorno-Karabakh, Masis Mayilian expressed his deep concern for such propaganda being taught in Azeri schools through textbooks.

These quotes were taken from the 2018 publication, 'Armenophobia in Azerbaijan; Organised Hate Speech & Animosity towards Armenians'. If you would like a copy, please contact the Armenian Embassy in London.

UK- ARMENIAN RELATIONS

"Armenia has turned into a "cancer tumour" on the region." – **Elnur Aslanov, Head of the Political Analysis and Information Department of the Azerbaijan Presidential Administration**

Meeting with Judith Farnworth, the British Ambassador to Armenia, we were informed of tension between the new Prime Minister of Armenia and the President of Nagorno-Karabakh, who was close to the old regime in Armenia which fell in April 2018 following the Velvet Revolution.

We learnt that the work of the British embassy in Yerevan was growing, having appointed a third British staff member, now boosting co-operation on trade and investment. The embassy now promotes mental health support for people traumatised by the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Mrs Farnworth thought that the negotiations promoted by the Minsk Group were not about territory, but dignity and self-respect instead, highlighting that 'sequencing' moves was the key to improving relations. She suggested confidence-building measures, such as an exchange of journalists.

"If Nagorno-Karabakh gave up territory, how could its security be assured?" – **UK Ambassador to Armenia**



Baroness Cox and UK Ambassador to Armenia, Judith Farnworth in Yerevan

Questioned about international recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh, Mrs Farnworth replied that:

“The United Kingdom does not recognise Nagorno-Karabakh. Full stop.” – UK Ambassador to Armenia

In the last year, Armenia has risen from 80th to 61st position in the rankings published by Journalists Without Borders. It is a sign of growing free speech in Armenia, but has coincided with apparent concern in Moscow about the new regime.

“We are helping Armenia to help itself and we respect its multi-vector approach to international relations”
– UK Ambassador to Armenia

“I would like to send a new message to the world that we are not isolated. The fact that we are not recognised is I think temporary; recognition is the essential precondition for security” –

Foreign Minister of Nagorno-Karabakh

Foreign Minister, Masik Mayilian was relieved to tell us that the conflict with Azerbaijan had gone through a quiet phase between September 2018 and June 2018. Sadly, an Azeri soldier was killed on 1st June 2019, and a second only a few days later. The Azeris responded with grenade launches and 62mm artillery.

Nagorno-Karabakh was willing to accept international monitors along the conflict line and to report violations of the ceasefire agreements. Mr Mayilian informed us that Azerbaijan was opposed to such monitoring. Mr Mayilian told us that the Azeris are building up troops in the Autonomous Republic of Nakhichevan, and were conducting joint military exercises there with Turkey. Nakhichevan borders one of the main strategic roads linking Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia.

The Azeris, he said, were continuing to grow their arsenal of modern weaponry, buying mainly from Israel, but also Russia, Turkey and Pakistan.

Mr Mayilian introduced the concept of ‘remedial recognition’ – an international recognition which would solve many of the intractable challenges which Nagorno-Karabakh is currently facing. Besides Armenia, he did not identify any particular country which was close to making such a recognition. His assessment was that the EU, Russia and the United States were working together on the basis of consensus.

Finally, the Foreign Minister acknowledged that in reality Russia was the only country with the power to halt a war between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, should one tragically flare up again.

Baroness Cox
and her team
meet with
the President
of Nagorno-
Karabakh, the
Foreign
Minister and
the Health
Minister



"Lady Cox has done her best to open roads from Artsakh to the UK and we are grateful to you. Unfortunately, we now find ourselves in a blockade and our mission is to break the blockade" –

Bako Sahakyan, President of Nagorno-Karabakh

President Sahakyan reported that he had recently met with the leadership of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group, which has responsibility for resolving the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. For the President, the number one issue was security.

"Our partners the mediators agree with our proposals. The solution to the conflict will be based on civilised relations between Azerbaijan and Artsakh. The current policy of Azerbaijan to isolate and blockade Artsakh will bear no fruit" –

President of Nagorno-Karabakh

President Sarakyan commended the humanitarian work of HART, which he described as *"an example of how we can break through the tension through humanitarian programmes."*



HART US Advisory board member, Lucy Clements with the Rehabilitation Centre Founder and CEO Vardan Tadevosyan, HART Trustee Graham Hadley, Karine (Chief Therapist) and HART Fundraising & Communications Executive Lola Yusuf

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The HART team wishes to thank everyone who received us in Armenia and Artsakh for their warm welcome, generous hospitality and valuable contributions of information.

We also wish to thank all of our supporters who have generously donated funds to the Lady Cox Rehabilitation Centre over the years. Without you, Vardan and his staff would be unable to do their transformational work.



Baroness Cox and Vardan Tadevosyan speak with staff and patients in the garden of the Rehabilitation Centre. With no recycling facilities available in Nagorno-Karabakh, Vardan turns littered water bottles into a creative sun shelter for his patients.

For more information about the Lady Cox Rehabilitation Centre in Nagorno-Karabakh visit

www.theladycoxrehabilitationcentre.org

To find out more about the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust visit

www.hart-uk.org

To donate to the rehabilitation centre, please visit the HART website and put a reference to 'The Rehab Centre'