

HART VISIT TO ARMENIA

Ten months after the Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire



Marushya (left), an Armenian villager from Davit Bek near the disputed Armenian-Azerbaijani border, tells Baroness Cox (right): ‘This is my home and I will not leave.’



Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART)

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"I cannot express my feelings. We have lost our families and our homes and the place that we loved."

Artashes Chillingayan, from Shushi

"The village was targeted by drones and houses were burned by the shelling, but people didn't want to leave... The sound of the drones was so terrible that the children didn't know where to hide from them."

Riya Babayan, from Kashatagh region

"The bombardment and shelling of the town was so intensive that we hid the women and children in basements."

Varagan, from Shushi

"It is already ten months since the end of the war, but for me and the parents who lost their children, the war hasn't ended."

Vahik, from Togh village in Hadrut region

"The world should know about the behaviour of the Azeri and Turk aggressors... People were literally turned into dust."

Yerjanik Hambartsomyan

"After we evacuated our village, one woman remained, and later her body was found. She had been strangled by the [Azeri and] Turkish occupiers."

Vladimir Tonyan, from Dratik village in Hadrut region

"Now, when we hear fireworks, we don't like them. My grandchildren can tell the difference between the sounds of fireworks and drones."

Ina Babayan, from Kashatagh region

"You can hear most weapons when they are fired. But Smerch missiles, you don't hear until they are near you... I feared the silence most because we didn't know what was happening."

Nadejda Sarkissian, from Hadrut region

INTRODUCTION

Last year's ceasefire in Nagorno Karabakh brought an end to major hostilities. It did not, however, put a stop to human suffering.

As one refugee from Togh village told us: *"It has been ten months since the end of the war. But for me and the parents who lost their children, the war hasn't ended."* Or as Armenia's Human Rights Ombudsman described: *"There may be an impression that the war is over [but] the feeling of insecurity remains. **The challenges are deepening and growing.**"*

- Over 40,000 ethnic Armenians – 27 per cent of Nagorno Karabakh's population – have been displaced, mostly across the border into Armenia.
- The World Food Programme estimates that 20,000 people face food insecurity in Armenia. Many are from areas of Nagorno Karabakh now occupied by Azerbaijan.
- Those who remain in Nagorno Karabakh face the monumental task of rebuilding their towns and villages – an estimated 14,000 civilian structures were damaged or destroyed last year – whilst dealing with the emotional trauma of war and the prospect of future conflict.
- Armenian detainees and missing persons are vulnerable to killings, torture, indefinite imprisonment or enslavement in Azerbaijan. Family and relatives have little access to justice.
- There are ongoing concerns over the fate of hundreds of Armenian Christian monuments and cultural heritage sites within Nagorno Karabakh, which are now under Azerbaijan's control.
- There are also growing concerns about renewed military offensives. Tensions are high in the disputed border regions of Syunik and Gegharkunik where Azerbaijani armed forces have crossed into Armenia.

We visited Armenia to hear first-hand accounts of these urgent concerns. Everyone whom we met expressed a need for a comprehensive international response. Their testimonies were inherently disturbing and build on the evidence from our visits to Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh in November 2020 and April 2021.

All of the points raised come back to one central principle: there must be no impunity for the most serious international crimes. Perpetrators of atrocities must be held to account. We must no longer turn a deaf ear to the suffering of the people of Nagorno Karabakh. Nor should we dismiss the threat to peace caused by Azerbaijan's provocative territorial incursions in Syunik and Gegharkunik, which hitherto have gone unchallenged.



Photo taken in Nagorno Karabakh during the 2020 war: the aftermath of Azerbaijani military attacks

VOICES OF REFUGEES

Approximately 80 per cent of Nagorno Karabakh is now occupied by Azerbaijan. Thousands of ethnic Armenians have been forced to flee their homes, a significant proportion of whom have crossed the border into Armenia. We had the painful privilege of meeting some of these refugees. They shared their stories of loss and grief with detail and courage. Extracts of their testimonies are recorded below.

Nadejda Sarkissia, from Hadrut Region

“This is the third war in my life. During the first war I was a child. I lost a brother and an uncle. The start of this war was sudden for us. It was an ordinary Sunday morning. There was no sign of a war until explosions suddenly started.

“Our house was built on top of a cave which we used to hide in during wartime. We invited our neighbours in – 20 people including four children aged eight, nine and ten (two boys and two girls). The children couldn’t understand what was going on.

“When the fighting became more intensive we realised that the Azeris were using different types of weapons. We found remnants of Israeli and Czech-made bombs in our backyard including unexploded weapons and smerch missiles.



Nadejda Sarkissia from Hadrut Region

“You can hear most weapons when they are fired. But Smerch missiles, you don’t hear until they are near you. Azeris also used F16 fighters. Most of the time, the women and children were alone because the men were fighting. At one point, we endured two hours of silence from the lines. I feared the silence most because we didn’t know what was happening. Almost ten women left the shelter. One child had a high temperature and an elderly woman lost her mental orientation.”

“When we finally left we discovered that Azerbaijani forces were very close to our house. All the children and many adults now have some psychological problems as a result of what they have experienced.”

Irina Galstyan, from Berdzor Kashatagh region

“I lost my son during the war and my house and I have nothing left. When the war started, my son brought me to Yerevan for safety and then went back to defend our country. He was killed. Azerbaijan targeted trucks and cars on the roads. I now rent a house in Yerevan, but I do not have enough money to pay the rent. Everything is gone.”



Irina Galstyan from Berdzor Kashatagh region

Vahik, from Togh village in Hadrut region

“I lost my only son who was serving with the military in Martakert. He had been in military service for one year and four months when the war started. His daughter was in Stepanakert.

“By the fourth or fifth day of the war, we realised that the war was serious. Just before the war, the Azeris appointed a Turkish general as head of anti-aircraft defence. When we heard this, we understood that we were also at war with Turkey.

“It was clear that the artillery shooting was very precise and from a long distance and we understood that the enemy was experienced and professional. On the tenth day of the war, we got instructions from the regional head to leave the village. The person who commanded the evacuation was deputy-head of the region and he was later killed. When the evacuation of Togh village took place, two people refused to leave the village.

“On 21 October, Turks came in to the village and they killed the two people who remained. One was 80 and the other was 89. They shot them.

“We left the village and went to Martuni region. In Stepanakert, I received a call that my son had been transferred to Martakert. At that time, the Turks had infiltrated the region and were near Amaras monastery. I decided to go and find my son and reached

a village near to where he was fighting. I called him and he told me that he was on a mountain nearby. When I took a soldier to visit that place, we discovered that intensive fights were taking place near the mountain, but my son hadn't mentioned this. When the Turks saw that they couldn't take the mountain, they started an intensive artillery bombardment and finally, they called an air strike which dropped a huge bomb on the mountain. My son was killed in a group of 18 on the mountain including the Commander of the Battalion.

"It is already ten months since the end of the war, but for me and the parents who lost their children, the war hasn't ended. Every day and every hour we try to find who is guilty. But with every day, we lose hope that we will bring the perpetrators to justice. We are sure that the losses of the war are more than 5,000. The perpetrators must be called to account. Our soldiers fought for their freedom and their future until the last minute of their lives."

Artashes Chillingayan, from Shushi

"I was an officer in the army and fought in the war. Two of my sons served in the war. One is still in the army. Another son was shot and killed in Shushi. I cannot express my feelings. We have lost our families and our homes and the place that we loved."



Artashes Chillingayan from Shushi

Yerjanik Hambartsomyan

“I was disabled during the first Artsakh war [in the 1990s]. I was a paediatrician before the war and during the war served as a reserve doctor in the hospital. We supplied clothes and first aid to the front line, since most civilians had been evacuated to Armenia. The world should know about the behaviour of the Azeri and Turk aggressors, since Armenia is the last frontier of the Muslim world before they attack and occupy Europe. If it continues like this, the world will change.

“I am a doctor. If you look at the bodies of the war victims, you find that the Azeris and Turks used very intensive types of artillery. People were literally turned into dust. They also used internationally-banned weapons on civilian areas, including heavy artillery systems and phosphorous bombs. [They] also beheaded people. We don’t know how many years it will take for our land to recover.

“Children have a lot of health issues in the region because of the consequences of war... During 30 years of independence, we preserved two Persian mosques in Shushi, and there were 17 churches in the town. But already, the Azeris are destroying or desecrating our churches.”

Vladimir Tonyan, from Dratik village in Hadrut region



Vladimir Tonyan from Hadrut region

“From the very first days of the war, they used cluster bombs. When the war started we didn’t know what was going on. So I called my son who was in military service, and he told me the war had started. On 15 October, I was on the road in a convoy of vehicles bringing assistance to others when we were attacked by Azeri drones. [He was wounded on 15 October.]

“Six trucks were blown up. The first vehicle was hit by a 500kg bomb. Six people were killed. I was wounded and taken to hospital. After the attack, remnants of cluster bombs were found at the site. After we evacuated our village, one woman remained, and later her body was found. She had been strangled by the Azeri occupiers.”

Ina Babayan, from Kashatagh region

“After the war started we soon realised how serious it was. And then refugees from other places started arriving. From the day they arrived, we tried to look after them. After a while, my sister’s husband said that we needed to flee our village. I was the driver of the car that went to collect people. On the way to Yerevan, we learned that my sister’s husband had been wounded. We finally reached Yerevan.



Ina Babayan from Kashatagh region

Now, when we hear fireworks, we don’t like them. My grandchildren can tell the difference between the sounds of fireworks and drones. At the hospital we saw soldiers

who were wounded and they were in terrible condition. Many were burned as a result of the bombings.”

The unspoken story



An unspoken story: the expression of a refugee speaks of grief and trauma

There are times when silence speaks volumes. During a meeting with refugees, one woman sat for the whole hour in silence, unmoving. On her chest was a picture of her husband, whom one can only imagine had been killed in the war. She did not react when others shared their stories of violence and grief. She did not speak at all. Her look alone speaks volumes of profound loss and trauma. In so many ways, she represents the silent cries of the unheard majority of the people of Nagorno Karabakh and a quiet despair that words can neither convey the depth of suffering experienced, nor any hope that anyone will listen. Our hope is that by sharing her story, we can begin to enable those silent cries to be heard.

VISIT TO SYUNIK PROVINCE

Last year's ceasefire brought an end to major hostilities in Nagorno Karabakh. However, a new security crisis is unfolding along parts of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, away from the initial conflict zone in Nagorno Karabakh.

During our visit, we heard numerous reports of territorial encroachments by Azerbaijani troops across the international Armenian-Azerbaijani border. We were told that hundreds of Azerbaijani troops are deployed in pockets of territory in Armenia's Syunik and Gegharkunik provinces. In some border villages, Azerbaijani armed units have taken control of strategic positions, farmlands, livestock and water resources. We heard widespread concerns that, without a comprehensive international response, cross-border military incursions will increase, resulting in further loss of life and mass displacement of civilians.

'Our historic lands'

Reports of territorial encroachments should be seen in the context of recent speeches by Ilham Aliyev, President of Azerbaijan. He claimed during a victory speech in December 2020 that Nagorno Karabakh – and territories beyond Nagorno Karabakh – “*are our historical lands*” that belong to Azerbaijan. He made similar territorial claims in 2013, 2014, 2016 and 2018, promising the return of these lands to Azerbaijan.

The President claims that, according to maps in Azerbaijan's possession, its troops have crossed no border. It is “*their glorious mission*” to liberate “*our native lands from occupiers*”. Such statements provoke a deep sense of fear among Armenians in Syunik and Gegharkunik provinces, whose villages are now under serious threat. To date, however, Azerbaijan's provocative claims and territorial incursions have gone unchallenged by the international community.

The village of Davit Bek

We visited a border village of Syunik province, called Davit Bek, described by some commentators as the ‘new frontline’ of conflict. The village lies a few hundred metres from the disputed Armenian-Azerbaijani border. “*There are Azeri soldiers very nearby all the time,*” we were told.

In the 2020 war, Armenian villagers in Davit Bek endured numerous aerial bombardments, resulting in six deaths and 17 wounded. Almost 100 homes were hit – we witnessed the destruction of property.



Marushya (left) talking to Baroness Cox and HART-partner Artemis outside her home in Davit Bek

Much of the village's grazing lands have since been occupied by Azerbaijan. Any animals that stroll across the border into Azerbaijan are not returned, so the villagers no longer keep livestock. *"We used to have many cattle but all our grazing lands have been occupied by the Azeris", one villager told us. "They stole the cattle that went to the grazing lands, so we sold the rest of our cattle and now depend on agriculture, but our lands have been much reduced by Azeri occupation."*

Before the war in 2020, the village consisted of 140 families. Following the war, many have moved to the nearby town of Kapan in search of jobs, as they no longer have access to their land, with escalating concerns that their water supplies could be stopped. The exodus of villagers adds to the shortage in local labour, which itself exacerbates Davit Bek's food insecurity.

'This is my home and I will not leave'

One villager from Davit Bek, called Marushya, told us:

“I am 86-years-old and have lived in this house all my life. I have five children, eight grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. My husband died in 2008, so I live alone here.

“When the war started in 2020, I was in Kapan so stayed there. But my house was hit by shrapnel that came through my bathroom roof from a bomb nearby. The house was hit several times.

“The border is just over that hill (a few hundred metres away). We used to have cattle, but the Azeris have taken all the grazing lands and when the cattle crossed to them, the Azeris refused to return them. Life is difficult now, and we are afraid the Azeris will attack again. But this is my home and I will not leave.”

Another villager said:

“Whatever has happened has happened. We just want to live peacefully and have no more war... We want our children to grow up in the village. We will not leave. Please tell the world about our situation.”



An example of damage to a villager's home caused by shrapnel

The road from Goris to Kapan

The main route to the village of Davit Bek – via a the 40km road linking Goris with Kapan – traverses along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border through disputed territory. Parts of the road are now ‘officially’ outside of Armenia, enabling Azerbaijan to prevent passage of Armenian traffic. We heard reports that some Azerbaijani checkpoints have started to stop Iranian vehicles inside Armenian territory (the Iranian border is only 15 miles south) and to demand payment for passage.

Military incursions along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border are frequent. Opposing military positions are separated from one another by only 30-100m, whereas before the

2020 war they were hundreds of metres apart. A new road connecting Goris with Kapan is being built in an attempt to ease tensions and to guarantee Armenian trade routes. Many fear, however, that a new road will in effect cede the current road – and control of its neighbouring villages and land – to Azerbaijan.

Reports of cattle raids are common, not just in Davit Bek. An Armenian woman from Tegh village (north of Davit Bek in Syunik province) had bought a herd of 120 sheep on credit, all of which were stolen. In Kut village (Gegharkunik province), 80 cattle were stolen from five villagers. We also heard reports that Azerbaijanis have shot the cattle of local Armenian villagers and, in one instance, had a barbecue with the slaughtered meat near the village.



(Left) The HART team travels along the road to Goris
(Right) Signs show the newly-determined Azerbaijan border

Governor of Syunik Province

The Governor of Syunik province, Melikset Poghosyan, fought in all three wars in Nagorno Karabakh (1990-1994, 2016 and 2020). When his baby son was killed in the first war, he was unable to attend the funeral because he was serving. He described the emerging security crisis in Syunik province and its impact on livelihoods.

“There have been big changes since the war of 2020. A lot of land has been occupied by the Azeris. Villagers have lost their grazing land. Their livelihoods are reduced and they fear for their security. Any livestock that crosses the border is never returned.

“There are still 3,493 displaced people from Artsakh [Nagorno Karabakh] in the Syunik region. Most of the displaced have returned to Artsakh. 224 people from Syunik were killed during the 2020 war. The Azeris bombed the border villages and killed cattle. Syunik has many disabled people from the war, but no rehabilitation services.

“There is now no distance with the Azeris and there is great fear amongst the population. Morale is very low. There are 506km of border in the Syunik region with Azerbaijan. Incursions into Armenian territory along this borderline are frequent. Azeris are controlling the main road to Goris and the rest of Armenia. They are using fake maps and fake GPS to claim land that is not theirs.

“There is a worry that closer to winter there will be another round of incursions. Wherever we have incursions, the Azerbaijanis have already constructed infrastructures and have a lot of personnel.”



The HART team meets with Melikset Poghosyan, Governor of Syunik Province

WAR ON CHILDREN

During the 2020 war, civilians in Nagorno Karabakh endured almost daily military offensives by heavy artillery missiles, combat unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), aerial bombs, cluster munitions and Smerch multiple rocket launchers – weapons incapable of precision targeting – in breach of international humanitarian law and Geneva conventions.

Many children were killed or injured, with countless others suffering the psychological impact of exposure to rocket and missile attacks. Tens of schools and pre-schools were

damaged, including in Stepanakert, Hadrut, Shushi, Aygestan and Mataghis. For security reasons, all 220 schools and 58 pre-schools were closed during the conflict, which meant that all 24,000 children in Nagorno Karabakh were deprived of their Right to Education and the opportunity to attend school – in addition to the 4,000 pre-school children.



A young patient at the Lady Cox Rehabilitation Centre in Nagorno Karabakh

Civilians also suffered widespread destruction of other non-military objects, including medical emergency service centres and ambulances, food stocks, crops, livestock, electricity and gas plants, and drinking-water installations and supplies.

All such attacks on non-military objects are attacks on children. Of the thousands of families who have been forced to flee, the majority are children. According to Save the Children, many are showing signs of anxiety and sleep deprivation, especially those who do not have a family member with them or who have been separated from their parents and sent to stay with extended family or friends.

During our visit, one mother called Riya Babayan from Kashatagh region told us:

“I was seven-years-old when I was displaced during the first war from the Kashatagh region where I grew up. Now I am a mother and the story is the same. History is being repeated. After the first war, we tried to work for the region to become more prosperous. I have been a teacher for 16 years. But the war of 2020 has taken everything from us.

“My husband was a leader of the community and helped organise the evacuation of the children. None of the inhabitants of the region have escaped trauma from the war.



Riya Babayan from Kashatagh region: ‘The sound of the drones was so terrible that the children didn’t know where to hide from them.’

“Everyone is affected. After the children were evacuated, some of the women returned to defend Artsakh [Nagorno Karabakh]. My husband took part in the April 2016 war but caught a disease and died on the day of the signing of the peace agreement.

“In 2020, our home was 4km from the frontline. The village was targeted by drones and houses were burned by the shelling, but people didn’t want to leave. They stayed until the last day of evacuation. In Kashatagh region, drones were attacking even on the day of the final agreement.

“The sound of the drones was so terrible that the children didn’t know where to hide from them. Despite this, we remain a strong people. We will not surrender. Our strength is in our nature. It’s a victory in itself that three of the children

have been accepted into universities. We will carry on. The Azeris will not break our spirit and our lives.”

Children who remain in Nagorno Karabakh, or who have fled and returned, also face the problem of landmines – leftover from the previous war in the 1990s – with their gardens and playgrounds now covered in other explosives and hazardous devices. According to HALO Trust, there have been more landmine accidents per capita in Nagorno Karabakh than anywhere else in the world.

WAR OF TERROR

During our visit, we were urged not to underestimate Azerbaijan and Turkey’s provocative statements and recent territorial incursions. Many Armenians regard escalating tensions as part of a long and ongoing process of genocide, or a ‘War of Terror’.

The genocide process began with massacres of Armenians in Turkey in the late 19th century, and reached a peak during the First World War in Turkey, in the great Armenian genocide. The anti-Armenian religious-ethnic cleansing extended into the South Caucasus and continued there after the war’s end. Armenians were massacred in the Azerbaijani capital, Baku, in 1918, and in Shushi in 1920. The process was suspended for a time by the imposition of Soviet power in the early 1920s. As the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse, in 1988, it erupted again with the massacre of the Armenian residents of the city of Sumgait, near the Caspian Sea. This set in motion a chain reaction of violence, which produced the full-blown Azerbaijani-Armenian war of religious-ethnic cleansing from 1990-94. With Azerbaijan and Turkey’s joint war on Nagorno Karabakh in 2020, the process continued.

Cases of anti-Armenian rhetoric, or ‘Armenophobia’, continue to escalate among Azerbaijani and Turkish officials, state-dominated media outlets, non-state public figures and across social media. For example, President Aliyev regularly incites hatred. He pardoned and then promoted Armed Forces Lieutenant Ramil Safarov for the murder of Armenian Lieutenant Gurgen Margaryan during a NATO-sponsored training seminar, which as outlined by Amnesty International, signalled “*an endorsement of ethnically-motivated violence*” and “*that violence against Armenians is not only acceptable, but rewarded.*”

President Aliyev also incites hatred in public statements, referring to a “hypocritical, global Armenian conspiracy with Western politicians, who are embroiled in corruption and bribery,” reminiscent of Adolf Hitler’s “global Jewish conspiracy” thesis, reiterated many times in Nazi speeches as a pretext and justification for the Holocaust. He refers to Armenia as a “country of no value” and to Armenians as “savages”, “barbarians” and “dogs”.

Children in Azerbaijan are exposed to and taught Armenophobia. History syllabuses in Azerbaijani schools are, in places, flagrantly anti-Armenian. Curricula and textbooks depict Armenians and Christians as an ‘inferior enemy’ who intend to harm Islam and Azerbaijan. Violent events such as the Baku Pogrom of 1990, which virtually cleansed Baku of Armenians, has been either removed from textbooks or re-written as a history to be proud of. Such policies fuel anti-Armenian xenophobia and point to Azerbaijan’s violation of Article 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: protection against any discrimination and against any incitement to such discrimination.



Photo taken during the 2020 war: Smoke rises from an exploded shell behind the Lady Cox Rehabilitation Centre in Stepanakert

Such rhetoric cannot be dismissed as being merely for domestic consumption within Azerbaijan or Turkey. Nor should it be treated as a means by which these states ‘achieve some minor border adjustments’ or ‘a matter that can be resolved quickly by simple

negotiations between Governments’. The language of superiority and the denial of dignity to an ‘inferior enemy’ is the precise language of genocide.

There is a fear within Armenia that Azerbaijan and Turkey are testing the response of the international community. Yet their provocative claims, refusal to release Armenian prisoners and territorial incursions continue to go unchallenged. Neither state has been held to account for its words or actions, despite clear evidence of past, recent and ongoing atrocities.

MEETINGS WITH OFFICIALS

We held meetings with the President of Armenia, the Human Rights Ombudsman of Armenia, the World Food Programme’s Country Director and the UK Ambassador to Armenia among others. We also participated in the International Religious Freedom and Peace Conference in Etchmiadzin. Extracts from some of these meetings are recorded below.

Government of Artsakh

Officials within the Artsakh Government speak of a “*humanitarian disaster*” in Nagorno Karabakh. Despite their best efforts to provide rented accommodation and social support for displaced civilians, there is no external humanitarian support from international governments (beyond Armenia) to address the people’s complex needs. “*Our international isolation is continuous*”, said Artak Beglaryan, the Minister of State, before our visit.

His colleague Davit Babayan, the Foreign Minister of Artsakh, told us:

“We are in the most difficult situation we have ever faced, certainly since the 1915 genocide. We have suffered irreversible losses: thousands of young men, women and children perished in the war. For a small nation like ours, this is a considerably strong blow. It is a serious challenge to our independent statehood and security system. We live under the existential threat of genocide.

“We are like a person who has lost limbs. But we are still alive. If we are alive, it means there is a chance for recovery. But we cannot do that on our own. We need support. First, the support of the Armenian world. And second our friends internationally.

“Terror and radicalism are resuming. They can penetrate everywhere. We have to stop them. We want to be free and to live on our own land. The international community could demonstrate a more principled attitude towards persecution and radicalism.

“Artsakh is recovering step by step. The State is carrying out projects to build thousands of apartments for people in need. We need to rebuild our economy and preserve Armenians in Artsakh. The Azeris are trying to make people leave by all means. We appreciate the peace-keeping mission of the Russian Federation.

“Artsakh is an asset of the civilised world. If Artsakh is lost, the geopolitical situation will be dramatically changed, with much greater space in the South Caucasus for radicalism. So there is a geopolitical interest in supporting Artsakh. It may be small but it is important for the entire Christian world – but the Azerbaijan/Artsakh conflict is not a religious conflict. It is a struggle between evil and goodness in humanity. We will continue to stand and serve our country and people. Our unshakable faith is the guarantee of our survival and development.”

Sergey Ghazarayan, the Artsakh Government’s representative in Yerevan, told us:

“Since the war, we now only control 20 per cent of the region. Yet even within our own territory, we experience major safety and security concerns. Many of our people have been displaced to Armenia. They have lost family members in the war. There are regular incursions into Armenian lands. Azerbaijan control the border regions. Azeri soldiers and police intimidate local people. There is limited access to our territory for non-Artsakh residents. Despite these many injustices, the Government of Artsakh is not adequately represented in negotiations over status issues.

“Azerbaijan has rejected the most important principles of international law and is regularly violating the ceasefire agreement. Azerbaijan has also used international terrorists. The international community should be voicing their concern.”

Sergey Ghazarayan said that negotiations within the Minsk framework (for the resolution of border issues, displaced people, Prisoners of War) are *“the only acceptable option”*. He highlighted several obstacles to the process, including:

- Azerbaijan and Turkey have not been held to account for past or continuing atrocities. There is great fear that impunity will continue. There is little incentive to comply with any future settlement, especially as each country has significant economic and geopolitical influence, with considerable resources to spend on propaganda.
- The November 2020 ceasefire agreement has been broken by Azerbaijan without consequence. Azerbaijan refuse to return many Prisoners of War, thereby ignoring an integral part of the ceasefire agreement. Azerbaijan continues to destroy Armenian churches and monasteries. Azerbaijani military frequently encroach into Armenian territory and use gunfire to intimidate the Armenian population.

- The presence of foreign mercenaries, including Turkish-backed Syrian mercenaries who were deployed to shore-up Azerbaijan's military operations during the 2020 war and who have settled in Nagorno Karabakh.
- The ceasefire agreement insists upon a Russian peacekeeping presence in Nagorno Karabakh for five years (renewable). There is great fear about what will happen when the Russians leave.

Arman Tatoyan, Armenian Human Rights Ombudsman



Baroness Cox and Arman Tatoyan, Armenian Human Rights Ombudsman

Arman Tatoyan is an independent official responsible for defending and advancing human rights in Armenia. He told us:

“There may be an impression that the war is over, but this is not the case. Active military hostilities have stopped but the war remains. Shootings and incursions by the Azerbaijanis on the borders continue and the feeling of insecurity remains. The challenges are deepening and growing. Violations by Azerbaijanis are more targeted, such as deliberately setting fires next to villages causing destruction to

environment and pastures, grasslands etc. as well as targeted shootings on civilian homes.

“There are documented cases of killing of Armenians and of torture and executions. It doesn’t matter whether the perpetrators are border guards or armed forces... the treatment is the same. Tragically, because of security issues, all other human rights issues are being abandoned. For example, women’s rights, elderly, disability, social welfare... these are not a part of public discourse at the moment. Because of the war, there is some dangerous discourse in Armenia that human rights and democracy contradict security. That view is destroying the concept of democratic institutions.

“In order not to cause political anger, some politicians make statements that hinder or contradict the interests of our country. For example, stating that everything is ok when it is not, or ignoring incursions. Azerbaijan takes such statements or inaction as justification for continuing their violations.

“Aliyev has publicly proclaimed that he wishes to take Armenian lands as far as Yerevan.

“The Government has realised that it is not in the interests of the country to keep silent about the incursions. But unfortunately, the Government hasn’t taken control of information policy. It needs to present Armenia’s case and to ensure and enforce international protection measures in order to safeguard its own protection. Even press releases are formed in a way that do not cause anger to Azerbaijani government. As a member of the UN Human Rights Council, the Armenian government needs to use international protection measures properly and enforce them.”

Bishop Vrtanes Abrahamyan, Primate of Artsakh Diocese

As recorded in our previous reports, serious concerns remain over the fate of hundreds of Armenian Christian monuments and cultural heritage sites, which are now under Azerbaijan’s control. The sites include 161 churches, the ancient city of Tigranakert, Azokh Paleolithic Cave and the Nor Karmiravan tombs. Bishop Vrtanes Abrahamyan, Primate of Artsakh Diocese, said:

“It is a deep pain for us that the first country to adopt Christianity in the world is left alone in the world. No international or secular or Christian organisation has made any steps to condemn the destruction of Christian heritage in Artsakh.

“Is it fair to see the destruction and desecration of centuries old Christian places and to note the silence of the entire Christian world? It is time for the world to unite for the preservation of our Christian heritage. The world’s Christians should unite around respect for religious freedom and the protection of the Christian communities. Rise up and side for justice.”

President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia

Alen Simonyan, President of Armenia's National Assembly, expressed his commitment to peace and a desire to avoid conflict, *"even if Azerbaijan, supported by Turkey, are doing everything they can to take as much as they can... We will use all possible means to achieve peace and justice."*

Regarding Prisoners of War, he said:

"I can confirm that Armenia no longer has any Prisoners of War [POWs]. They were released following the November ceasefire agreement. In Azerbaijan, however, the Red Cross and the Ombudsman have evidence of torture of Armenian POWs – some are being sentenced to 10-20 years in prison."

Chair of Standing Committee on Foreign Relations in the Armenian Parliament

Eduard Aghajanyan, Chair of the Committee, said:

"Maintaining stability is a priority. Our main message and goal is lasting peace. Yet the main aim of Azerbaijan is to delegitimise the concept of peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia. They continue to escalate tensions. Azerbaijan is not holding to the trilateral agreement of 9 November 2020 or 11 January 2021, which included the release of all captives without preconditions and the reopening of communication channels that existed in Soviet times. Incursions and occupation of further Armenian land is a new and escalating situation. The international community has no grounds to support Azerbaijan since it is acting against international law, escalating conflict and committing crimes."

Alternative political voices

There is widespread dismay at the international community's lack of support for Armenia during the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and an increasing sense that it may be more advantageous for Armenia to forge closer links with Russia who may be the better 'friend' to Armenia than the West.

During meetings with senior figures at the Armenian National Congress, leaders of the Opposition and the International Centre for Development, we heard repeatedly that: *"Azerbaijan and Turkey must be held to account for war crimes committed in Nagorno Karabakh... Prisoners of War must be released... the morale of the country is extremely low and the people are divided... We are lost. We are broken. We need to recover."*

We also heard that *"border issues are one of Armenia's most urgent priorities"*:

“People in border areas (especially Syunik province) are now being deprived of their own land... In Armenia, because of the loss of land, we are now buying wheat from Georgia and Iran rather than depending on Armenian products because of loss of land. Artsakh was the main wheat producer for Armenia and had many vineyards too... One of the most productive regions for the Armenian economy has been occupied by Azerbaijan. Thus, agriculture in Armenia has been badly affected and many villages are losing their livelihood.”

International Religious Freedom and Peace Conference

We participated in the International Religious Freedom and Peace Conference, hosted by the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, 8-12 September 2021.

The conference brought together religious leaders, academics and humanitarian workers to reflect on the preservation of spiritual, cultural and historical heritage. Among the crises discussed was the fate of Armenian Christian churches, monuments and cultural heritage sites in Nagorno Karabakh, which are now under Azerbaijan’s control. The sites include 161 churches, the ancient city of Tigranakert, Azokh Paleolithic Cave and the Nor Karmiravan tombs.

Eleven months ago, UNESCO proposed to undertake an independent mission to draw a preliminary inventory of significant cultural properties, as a first step towards safeguarding the region’s heritage. However, a response by Azerbaijan is still awaited for UNESCO to proceed with the sending of a mission to the field. The lack of response from Azerbaijan is a serious cause for concern, especially in light of the previous systematic erasure of centuries-old Armenian religious sites in Nakhchivan, a historically Armenian land relocated by Stalin into Azerbaijan.

Destruction of monuments in Nakhchivan included an attack in 2005-06 on the Armenian Djulfa cemetery, where Azerbaijani soldiers, armed with sledgehammers and cranes, destroyed hundreds of hand-carved cross-stones. The soldiers reportedly dumped the debris into a nearby river. In total, an estimated 28,000 monuments were destroyed at Djulfa cemetery between 1997-2006, including 89 medieval churches, 5,840 cross-stones and 22,000 ancient tombstones. According to a recent study, the cemetery has been replaced by a military rifle range, although this is difficult to corroborate as the Government of Azerbaijan refuses entry to international inspectors.

DISABILITY REHABILITATION: UPDATE FROM OUR PARTNER IN NAGORNO KARABAKH

We received a thorough update from HART partner Vardan Tadevosyan, Founder and Director of the Lady Cox Rehabilitation Centre in Nagorno Karabakh, who reported that the Centre is fully operational despite escalating challenges.

The health facility provides hope and healing to over 1,000 patients every year. Its inspirational staff are helping to break the stigma of disability prevalent throughout the former Soviet Union. Therapeutic services include physiotherapy, speech therapy and occupational therapy, as well as a state-of-the-art hydrotherapy pool and a new Day Care Centre for children with autism.



Patient receiving treatment at the Rehabilitation Centre

Last winter, we were overjoyed to raise more than £71,000 for the Centre during our Emergency Appeal. Since February, these funds have supported:

- Monthly home visits to 150 patients;
- Vital salary support for the Centre's disability therapists, nurses and doctors;
- Patient daily meals;
- Weekly social events for child patients;
- Medical supplies.

Vardan summarised the Centre's current priorities:

"Last year, we were treating over 1,000 people with disabilities at the Centre. Today, we are treating over 1,500. We are treating even more patients than previous years because there are new people with disabilities who were wounded during the war. Since we reopened on the 1 December 2020, we have more than 200 soldiers with disabilities, in addition to caring for as many others."

“We continue to work with children and the elderly – those we have always treated since the Centre was founded. We will do all we can to ensure they get the treatment they need.

“Because of our work, people are coming to understand more about rehabilitation of the disabled. I have trained my team over many years and they have much experience. They have skills much in demand. Other wealthier international organisations are eager to recruit them. But I need to keep my staff and care for them. I must not lose them!

“I and my staff would like to take this chance to say thank you to HART, the HART team and HART supporters for their continued support. Not just the financial support but the moral support as well.

“We would like to say thank you so much HART for supporting us as we do our best for the people who need us and are suffering from disabilities.

“Many people offer to assist the centre but never deliver. We wait and wait and receive nothing. We struggle to fulfil our patients’ hopes. But HART helps us to fulfil these hopes. HART never fails us.”



Patient receiving treatment at the Lady Cox Rehabilitation Centre

CONCLUSION

The Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh – and in parts of Armenia, including Syunik and Gegharkunik provinces – face an urgent humanitarian and security crisis. Everyone we met expressed a need for a comprehensive international response.

- **Azerbaijani military offensives:** Incursions into Armenian territory, away from the primary conflict zone in Nagorno Karabakh, have increased in recent months. In some instances, troops have advanced 10km into Armenian territory. Such encroachments cause great concern for the local Armenian population, especially as Azerbaijan has been granted impunity for historic and continuing attacks.
- **POWs:** The well-documented mistreatment of Armenian Prisoners of War and civilian detainees by Azerbaijani forces, including humiliating treatment, torture, beheadings and desecration of corpses, are war crimes. All remaining Armenian detainees in Azerbaijan should be released and repatriated without further delay. Perpetrators of atrocities must be brought to justice.
- **Destruction of sites of Armenian culture and history:** During the 2021 International Religious Freedom and Peace Conference, concerns were raised over the fate of hundreds of Armenian Christian monuments and cultural heritage sites in Nagorno Karabakh, which are now under Azerbaijan's control. There is well-documented evidence of the complete erasure of at least one church. It is essential that UNESCO honours its proposal to send an independent mission to investigate all Armenian cultural and religious sites to ensure their physical preservation and to guarantee the rights of Armenian clergy and religious communities to continue to run them and live in them. The OSCE Minsk Group should define these sites and artefacts as vulnerable targets and ensure that measures are in place for an immediate response to an attack.
- **Impact on families:** Armenian officials speak of a 'humanitarian disaster' in Nagorno Karabakh. An estimated 40,000 civilians are displaced because of the war, 27 per cent of the entire population. There are grave concerns over the psychological trauma and practical challenges among the thousands of families – especially children – who have endured the anguish of the loss of fallen soldiers, missing persons and injured persons. They also face a loss of water resources, agricultural lands and hydro-electrical infrastructure, whilst trying to rebuild towns and villages destroyed by war.

There is an urgent need to end the impunity with which Azerbaijan, supported by Turkey, has carried out such systematic, wide-ranging and brutal violations of human rights. To date, neither state has been held to account for its actions by the international community, despite clear evidence of past, recent and ongoing atrocities.

As one Government of Artsakh spokesperson told us:

“The people of Artsakh [Nagorno Karabakh] have few international friends. The international community was silent during the 2020 war. Even as foreign mercenaries were being imported into the conflict, the world was silent.

“We do our best to raise the alarm, to pass onto international governments the actual situation. But no-one has been condemned. One of the main mistakes that we made is that we had too much hope, too much reliance, on the international community.”

Perpetrators of atrocities must be held to account. We must no longer turn a deaf ear to the suffering of the people of Nagorno Karabakh. Nor should we dismiss the threat to peace caused by Azerbaijan’s provocative territorial incursions in Syunik and Gegharkunik provinces, which hitherto have gone unchallenged.



A refugee from Nagorno Karabakh, whose son was killed during the war, stands next to a collection of photos of fallen soldiers

Genocide of Armenians ‘a very real possibility’

During the 2020 war in Nagorno Karabakh, human rights group Genocide Watch issued a ‘Genocide Emergency Alert’, which classified Azerbaijan at Stage 9 (extermination) and Stage 10 (denial) of the ten stages of the genocidal process. Similar warnings were issued by other genocide scholars, including the International Association of Genocide Scholars:

“...history, from the Armenian genocide to the last three decades of conflict, as well as current political statements, economic policies, sentiments of the societies and military actions by the Azerbaijani and Turkish leadership should warn us that genocide of the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, and perhaps even Armenia, is a very real possibility. All of this proves that Armenians can face slaughter if any Armenian territory is occupied...”

“And already a case can be made that there is conspiracy to commit genocide, direct and public incitement to commit genocide, and attempt to commit genocide... We appeal to the international community to raise their voices against xenophobia, aggression, and war, and for the prevention of new genocide.”

The phrase ‘never again’, endorsed by signatories of the 1948 Genocide Convention, rings very hollow. States must fulfil their treaty obligations to prevent and protect. Effective action is needed to end Azerbaijan and Turkey’s impunity and to prevent further bloodshed.