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WRC ARMENIA



*UPDATES ON THE  
NAGORNO  
KARABAKH  
HUMANITARIAN  
CATASTROPHE*

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# ABOUT AZERBAIJAN'S MOST RECENT OFFENSIVE ON NAGORNO-KARABAKH



On September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh. After holding the region under the threat of renewed armed conflict especially since December 12, 2022, with the complete blockade of the region, Azerbaijan's latest attack was the final blow to the region and its 120,000 people. For nearly 10 months, the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh was left without protection and basic human security. As a result, they were compelled to abandon their ancestral homes and relocate to mainland Armenia.

It is important to note that they were not simply fleeing because they chose to but because they were forced to. This is ethnic cleansing by Azerbaijan towards the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. As Luis Moreno Ocampo, the first chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court qualifies Azerbaijan's actions as genocide. He says: "In international law, the Genocide Convention of 1948 makes it clear that one way to commit the crime of ethnic cleansing is by "deliberately inflicting on [a] group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part" (Article II c).

By blocking the Lachin Corridor in December 2022, Aliyev turned Nagorno-Karabakh into an open-air concentration camp for 100,000 Armenians. This week's military intervention added killing (Article II a) and causing serious bodily and mental harm (Article II b) to the ledger." Azerbaijani military proudly videotapes its war crimes and posts them on social media to further terrorize Armenians. Moreover, an Azerbaijani telegram channel was picking photos of missing persons (mainly women and children) and encouraging its readers to find these missing people and sexually assault them or cause irreversible bodily harm to them ([OSINT Report on this here](#)).

As these recent attacks showed, Azerbaijan, unlike its public statements and positions voiced during the negotiations, does not have an integration plan for NK Armenians that involves respect for their basic human rights, freedom of speech, and freedom of movement as evidenced by the recent attack and its aftermath.



As a result of Baku's indiscriminate shelling of the region, 35 civilians were injured out of which 13 were minors, and 18 civilians were killed, 6 of whom were minors. The number of killed in action on the Armenian side, 200, is especially high considering the power asymmetry between the two armies. Too many are still missing, we have yet to be informed of the actual number of POWs, military or civilian.

A humanitarian crisis led to a crisis of effective governance- tragedy struck the already traumatized people again when on the 25th a petrol tank exploded killing and severely injuring desperate civilians who were looking for fuel to reach Armenia. The explosion has killed 68, 105 are still missing, while 290 were injured most of whom had to be urgently airlifted from the region because its failing hospitals did not have the capacity to provide medical services.

Another concerning issue is the cultural heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Azerbaijani side has consistently demonstrated a lack of respect for these historical assets, and unfortunately, this situation is unlikely to be an exception. It is vital to recognize the importance of preserving this cultural heritage and ensuring that transferable items are safely transferred to Armenia.



Nver, an 8-year-old, and Mikayel, a 10-year-old, tragically lost their lives due to Azerbaijani shelling in the village of Sarnaghbyur. Mikayel's body was recovered on the same day as the attack, while the search for young Nver continued for several days. On September 23, the remains of four civilians were evacuated from Sarnaghbyur village, including the body of 8-year-old Nver.

# THE STATE OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS SITUATION DURING THE ETHNIC CLEANSING

The 10-month blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan posed a significant challenge to women's rights, specifically their sexual and reproductive rights, which we previously updated separately in August 2023. The military operation on September 19, which resulted in numerous civilian injuries only intensified this crisis. We have received reports from Stepanakert indicating that local hospitals lacked even basic medicines to provide first aid to the wounded. The closure of the Lachin Corridor trapped both the injured individuals and the general population within Nagorno-Karabakh. In this situation, giving birth was particularly challenging for women due to the lack of electricity, limited access to medical supplies, and hospitals overwhelmed with wounded individuals.

On September 24, the first group of Armenian civilians from Nagorno-Karabakh arrived in Armenia's Syunik region. Their arrival was marked by a heart-wrenching scene: they came in a state of starvation, carrying just one bag of essential items. These individuals were forced to leave behind not only their properties but also the many years of their lives spent in their homeland, along with their hopes for a brighter future.

Many individuals have endured days of waiting in line to leave Nagorno-Karabakh, as the sole route to Armenia\* became congested with vehicles, resulting in a significant traffic jam on the winding mountain road.

According to the Ministry of Health some people, including the elderly, died while on the road to Armenia, because they were “exhausted due to malnutrition, left without even taking medicine with them, and were on the road for more than 40 hours.” The road blockage prevented ambulances from reaching individuals in need of medical assistance.

It was especially tough for women who had lost their husbands to arrange the move for themselves and their kids. The last groups of displaced individuals comprised not only single/widowed women but also residents from care facilities for the elderly and disabled. A birth also occurred during the journey to Armenia, and it was welcomed and supported by the people in the nearby crowded vehicles on 26 September.

\*It's important to note that the distance from Stepanakert to Kornidzor village in Armenia is approximately 75 kilometers, which takes about 2 hours to drive.

During these days, many women's needs, including those related to sexual and reproductive health, went unattended during the long traffic jams. Throughout the arduous 40-plus-hour journey, in overcrowded vehicles, discussions about menstrual hygiene, access to menstrual pads, and the healthcare requirements of pregnant women were notably absent, as everyone's primary focus was solely on reaching Syunik. During this crisis, the voices and needs of marginalized groups of women, such as women with HIV, women with disabilities, and elderly single women, were unfortunately not adequately addressed.

Upon their arrival in Armenia, families found a safe environment where they could finally reflect on their experiences. Many recounted that after September 19, they were unable to fulfill their basic needs and that leaving their birthplace was the only means of survival.

People shared that Azerbaijan's initial attack on villages occurred around 1 o'clock in the afternoon, precisely when children were typically returning home from school. This circumstance clarified why, just two days after September 19, numerous parents were able to find their children in school shelters.

Many individuals report that their elderly relatives chose not to leave Nagorno-Karabakh, and there is a lack of information regarding their well-being. Furthermore, some individuals have expressed concerns that their elderly relatives may have been victims of violence or killed by Azerbaijani soldiers.





Armenia's response to the needs of the displaced population is coordinated at both the community and national levels. However, it's worth noting that the specific needs of women and other vulnerable groups are not always addressed properly within this process. Simultaneously, it's important to highlight that our organization has conducted several studies\* on displacement and the government's response to the 44-day war in 2020. These findings are crucial for ensuring that the current response is more attuned to gender-sensitive considerations.

Today, many women's rights organizations are at the forefront of delivering humanitarian and psychosocial support to the displaced population. Simultaneously, it is of utmost importance to actively work towards implementing universally applicable standards for services and support that are inclusive and ensure that no one is excluded.

Many international actors have, unfortunately, not given the situation the gravity it requires. After enduring months of inhumane and degrading treatment, the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, who have already experienced a level of trauma that could last a lifetime, have now been uprooted once more and forcibly displaced.



\*See details: <https://womenofarmenia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Artsakh-war-and-womens-rights.pdf>  
<https://shorturl.at/bPW69>

## *OUR CALL TO ACTION IS AS FOLLOWS:*

To the international community and donor organizations:

- Increase aid packages to Armenia to relieve the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding here. Working with women's rights organizations in border communities is essential for relieving the housing and material, psychological, and legal needs of the forcibly displaced population.
- As SRHR issues are often forgotten in this context it is vital to fund NGOs working on this issue to support the displaced women and girls in the realization of their sexual and reproductive rights.
- The EU border Mission in Armenia needs funding and a flexible mandate. At best we are at risk of continuous violent borderization at worst there is a high risk of Azerbaijan invading Armenia, continued support for the mission is essential. Azerbaijan should be pressured to let the EU mission monitor its side of the border.