



What happened to all the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh?

**An Exodus Out of Indigenous Lands:
Azerbaijan's Forced Displacement
of the Ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh**

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White Paper

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Contact: Sofia Gevorgian, Emily Ekshian info@cftjustice.org
3435 Wilshire Blvd., Ste. 1710, Los Angeles, California 90010
The Center for Truth and Justice, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) corporation.
US Federal Tax ID # 87-1681664.

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1.0 Introduction

In September 2020, the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (also known as Artsakh) had three branches of government with an established Parliament and functioned as a democracy with a free economy. Its total population consisted of 150,000 predominantly ethnic Armenians.

As of September 2023, the population of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh drastically diminished as the population escaped to the Republic of Armenia for safety. Today, there are only a few dozen Armenians left in Nagorno-Karabakh. As a result, Nagorno-Karabakh has ceased to exist as an independent and democratic republic.

Nagorno-Karabakh, Artsakh was the 10th province of the Kingdom of Armenia from c. 189 BC to 387 AD. From the 7th to 9th centuries, it fell under Arab control. In 821, it formed the Armenian principality of Khachen and around the year 1000 was proclaimed the Kingdom of Artsakh, one of the last medieval eastern Armenian kingdoms and principalities to maintain its autonomy following Turkic invasions of the 11th and 14th centuries.

Today, for the first time in its history, Nagorno-Karabakh, Artsakh, stands devoid of Armenians.

This White Paper explains why the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh no longer exists and what happened to 150,000 indigenous Armenians that had continuously lived on their indigenous lands since 189 BC.

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

Before September 2020

The population of Nagorno-Karabakh was 150,000, and predominantly Armenian.

The geography of this Republic was 2,700 square miles (7,000 square kilometers).

November 9, 2020

A trilateral statement was signed by Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia to instill a ceasefire.

Most refugees returned to Nagorno-Karabakh. The total population of Nagorno-Karabakh dropped to 120,000. Many who lost their lands and homes could not return.

December 12, 2022

Azerbaijan blocked Nagorno-Karabakh from accessing Armenia through the only connecting road: the Lachin Corridor. This was the beginning of the blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh that lasted 9 months. Azerbaijan would also intermittently cut off gas supplies. The blockade meant that food supplies, medicines, and clean water would not be accessible for the 120,000 Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The economy collapsed, schools closed, transportation came to a full halt, and starvation and death set in for 9 long months. Nagorno-Karabakh became an open prison without food.

September 19, 2023 — September 20, 2023

Azerbaijan launched a full-scale offensive on the starving Nagorno-Karabakh population, and within 2 days, forced the capitulation of the de facto state.

Today

Nagorno-Karabakh is under Azerbaijan's control. For the first time since c. 189 BC, there are no Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh and, the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh is no longer.

September 27, 2020

During COVID-19, Azerbaijan launched an aggressive war on Nagorno-Karabakh. For 44 days, Azerbaijan targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure. Over 4000 Armenians died and hundreds of POWs were taken.

91,000 individuals were displaced to Armenia.

September 13, 2022

The Azerbaijani military shelled civilian areas within Armenia, killing over 200 Armenian servicemen. Armenian POWs were taken and tortured while other Armenian soldiers were killed, mutilated, and desecrated.

April 23, 2023

Azerbaijan established a formal, illegal checkpoint at the Hakari Bridge on the Lachin Corridor guarded by Azerbaijani servicemen.



September 24, 2023

120,000 Armenians escaped to Armenia in a matter of 8 days.



1.2 The Center for Truth and Justice

The Center for Truth and Justice (“CFTJ”) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that has been documenting crimes against Armenians since the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh by collecting first-hand testimonies from war survivors. CFTJ preserves evidence and makes it available for educational purposes and potential legal actions. The evidence-gathering methodology CFTJ uses can be found here: [Methodology](#).¹

CFTJ is comprised of attorneys and law students in the US, Armenia, and from Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as human rights advocates and other professionals, dedicated to amplifying the voices of victims of human rights violations, including discrimination, ethnic cleansing, displacement, war crimes, mass atrocities, and genocide.

CFTJ educates and trains teams in Armenia and from Nagorno-Karabakh on evidence-based interview techniques, compliant with international legal standards and rules of evidence. The mission of CFTJ is to be a living memorial to crimes against humanity. By being a permanent home for testimonials, CFTJ serves to make first-hand accounts available for study, education, and legal action in order to foster education, empathy, justice, and change.

1.3 Executive Summary

From December 12, 2022, the Azerbaijani government created a humanitarian crisis for the ethnic Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh as it trapped and starved the region under the blockade of the Lachin Corridor. 9 months later on September 19, 2023 — violating the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War ceasefire declaration — Azerbaijan launched another large-scale military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh (known to Armenians as Artsakh) in primarily civilian regions. Within a day of bombardment, a ceasefire was reached that forced the unconditional surrender of the de-facto republic and armed forces, as well as the integration of Nagorno-Karabakh into mainland Azerbaijan. Considering the grave human rights violations committed prior to the 2020 war, during the 2020 and 2023 wars, as well as blatant rhetoric from government officials deprecating ethnic Armenians, an exodus of Armenians began in the following days, seeing that nearly all 120,000 Armenians were forcefully displaced from their indigenous lands.

The purpose of this report is to present the atrocities committed by Azerbaijan towards the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh during the 9-month-long Blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh and the September 2023 aggressive war launched by Azerbaijan. This report is based on the eyewitness testimonies interviewed by CFTJ, identified herein as 23LC-NK0002, 23LC-0006, 23BLC-11, 23LC-NK0030, 23LC-0044, and 23LC-0047.

¹ <https://www.cftjustice.org/investigations-methodology>

1.4 Sources

The information in this *White Paper* about Azerbaijan’s forced displacement of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh has been obtained by CFTJ through firsthand testimonial interviews. The source of the information is therefore the victims themselves. The information presented herein has not been obtained from any secondary sources nor cross-checked with other reports. CFTJ also encourages the international community to initiate a full, fact-finding investigation into Azerbaijan’s mass displacement of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians and would make available translated recordings of the testimonies in support of that aim.

1.5 Background: 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War

On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan, with strong support from Turkey, launched an unprovoked and large-scale military invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh. Over a period of 44 consecutive days, Azerbaijan relentlessly bombed Nagorno-Karabakh, which was home to 150,000 Armenians, and resulted in the tragic loss of 5,000 Armenian lives. The majority of these casualties did not occur as a consequence of direct combat; rather, they were primarily attributed to Azerbaijan's extensive employment of artillery strikes and drone attacks. Civilian infrastructure, including churches, schools, hospitals, and even a maternity hospital, became deliberate targets of Azerbaijan's relentless aggression. While Armenians — armed with outdated and outmatched military weapons and systems — endeavored to defend themselves against the unexpected assault, Azerbaijan enjoyed the support of military superpowers such as Israel and Turkey, the latter being a member of NATO. Azerbaijan seized control of significant portions of Nagorno-Karabakh both during and after the ceasefire.

On November 9, 2020, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia signed a ceasefire statement known as the “Trilateral Statement”. Pursuant to the terms of the ceasefire agreement, peacekeeping forces from the Russian Federation were to remain deployed in the conflict zone until 2025, with the possibility of an extension thereafter. Since the 2020 war, Azerbaijan has continued to commit grave violations of international law, including torture, arbitrary detention, and extrajudicial killings. A confirmed 6 Armenian prisoners of war are still today detained in Azerbaijan from the 2020 war and have been subjected to torture since their capture.

2.0 Lachin Blockade (2022-2023)

On December 12, 2022, individuals of Azerbaijani origin, consisting of both civilians and soldiers dressed in civilian attire, masqueraded as “eco-activists” and established tent encampments, effectively closing off the Lachin Corridor. This corridor served as the sole route connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. This initial stage marked the beginning of a blockade that persisted for the following 9 months, severely restricting the freedom of movement of goods and all remaining 120,000 Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh. In April, Azerbaijani servicemen replaced them as the government established an illegal

checkpoint on the corridor.

Not only did Azerbaijan prevent the transport of people during the blockade, but they also repeatedly blocked the International Committee of the Red Cross, delivery of food, and medication, as well as caused water, electricity, and internet to be heavily rationed. The International Court of Justice in provisional measures called and reaffirmed that Azerbaijan “ensure unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles, and cargo along the Lachin Corridor” in the ongoing case Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Armenia v. Azerbaijan).²

The blockade that had led to the starvation of Nagorno-Karabakh caused legal experts to opine that Azerbaijan’s blockade of the Lachin constitutes genocidal intent. According to world-renowned, inaugural ICC Chief Prosecutor Luis Ocampo, “The blockade of the Lachin Corridor by the Azerbaijani security forces impeding access to any food, medical supplies, and other essentials should be considered a Genocide under Article II, (c) of the Genocide Convention: ‘Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction.’”³

2.1 Testimonies under the Lachin Blockade

CFTJ’s recorded testimonies demonstrate that the Azerbaijani-imposed blockade left an entire population in a humanitarian crisis; Nagorno-Karabakh’s economy had been crippled, causing food shortages, poverty, decreased production and trade, budget deficits, reduced tax revenues, unemployment, inflation, desperation, anxiety, stress, illness, starvation, and death. From the 44-Day War, Azerbaijan’s policy of forcing the removal of all Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh had been systematically planned, and the blockade was just among the final steps implemented to complete the absolute ethnic cleansing of Armenians from their indigenous lands.

2.2 Testimony: Separation and Death

Witness 23LC-NK0002⁴ was born in 1973 and raised in the city of Barda in Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). She and her family witnessed the Sumgait pogroms⁵ carried out in 1988 by Azerbaijan against the Armenians who lived in Azerbaijan during the Soviet period. As a result of the atrocities witnessed, her father suffered heart problems and passed away. In order

² <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/202958>

³

<https://www.cftjjustice.org/former-international-criminal-court-prosecutor-luis-moreno-ocampo-issued-report-stating-the-blockade-of-nagorno-karabakh-is-genocide/>

⁴ CFTJ recorded Witness 23LC-NK0002’s testimony on February 2, 2023.

⁵ On the Sumgait Pogrom, a massacre that targeted the Armenian population of the seaside town of Sumgait in the Azerbaijan SSR in late February 1988, see Peter Kenez, A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End (2nd edn, Cambridge University Press 2006) P. 272.

to survive the atrocities the witness and her mother fled from Azerbaijan and ended up living in the village of Vank in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The witness's husband fought in the first Nagorno-Karabakh War, which dated from 1988 to 1994. During that first war when Nagorno-Karabakh was fighting for independence from Azerbaijani rule, the witness's first cousin was taken captive by the Azerbaijani army, and he died while being held as a POW.

The witness's youngest son and her son-in-law fought against Azerbaijan in 2016 when Nagorno-Karabakh was militarily attacked, bombed, and shelled for four (4) continuous days. In 2020, during the 44-Day War, her two (2) sons fought again.

The fighting was so severe and unrelenting that on October 15, 2020, the witness had to flee her village of Vank. Her daughter, with her three young children, also needed to escape to safety and left behind her home and all their belongings in the village of Tumi, in the Hadrut region. The witness's daughter and three (3) grandchildren cannot return to their home because their village is under Azerbaijani control, and return would mean arrest and death. Witness 23LC-NK0002's daughter and grandchildren now live in Armenia.

On December 21, 2020, Witness 23LC-NK0002 was able to return home to her village of Vank in Nagorno-Karabakh, and when giving her testimony, she and her family were living under a blockade, suffering terrible hardships. Her baby granddaughter needed powdered milk/baby formula and diapers. Desperate for baby formula, Witness 23LC-NK0002 started running ads and announcements on social media seeking supplies for her granddaughter.

Also, her father-in-law was in poor health and required medical supervision, but due to a lack of fuel, they were unable to take him to the hospital. She states:

“[T]hey are playing with our lives. And this will have bad consequences.”

She describes how her pregnant daughter-in-law urgently needed to get to the hospital, but due to the lack of fuel and electricity, it was not possible to help her. Again, on December 20, 2022, she needed to go to the hospital for a much-needed check-up, but due to fuel shortages, they could not get her to the hospital. Sadly, on December 21, 2022, the daughter-in-law miscarried. The doctors told her that if she had been taken to the hospital in time, the miscarriage could have been prevented.

Witness 23LC-NK0002 states:

“[I]t is impossible to endure this pain. We still don't know the baby's cause of death. We still have not received the body of the baby, because an examination is necessary to find out the cause of death, and this can only be done in Armenia. Again, however, because of the blockade, we cannot get the baby to Armenia to have it examined, to establish the

cause of death so we can have the body returned to us. During the hospital stay, my daughter-in-law was lying on the table when the electricity was abruptly cut off, leaving her in need of urgent assistance.”

The witness’s ten-year-old nephew also has health issues. He requires specialized medical attention three (3) times a month, but the specialist is in Armenia. The next scheduled visit for the ten-year-old was on December 11, 2022. The parents of the ten-year-old left their other children with Witness 23LC-NK0002 in order to take their son for his treatment in Armenia. However, on December 12, 2022, the blockade went into immediate effect, without any advanced notice, causing the separation of the family; the children who were left with Witness 23LC-NK0002 were separated from their parents, indefinitely. On December 30, with the assistance of the ICRC, Witness 23LC-NK0002 transported her brother’s children to Goris, Armenia, so that they could be reunited with their parents. During the testimony, Witness 23LC-NK0002 stated:

“[W]e have elderly and pregnant women that need hospital care. How can we live like this? These are inhumane conditions.”

Despite the dramatic events that the blockade has caused her family, Witness 23LC-NK0002 felt lucky because she was able to live in her village of Vank, Nagorno-Karabakh, a condition no longer relevant following the evacuation of Nagorno-Karabakh months later.

2.3 Testimony: Travel and Family Reunification Nearly Impossible

Witness 23LC-0006⁶ was born in Stepanakert, Nagorno-Karabakh, and after the 44-Day War, moved to the village of Tsaghkashat in the Askeran Province of Nagorno-Karabakh. On December 6, 2022, she flew to Russia to visit her daughter.

When Witness 23LC-0006 returned to Armenia, she moved to Goris to await transportation to Nagorno-Karabakh so that she could return home. The only way to secure transit to Nagorno-Karabakh was by registering with the ICRC. She was told: “No one could return on their own.”

Witness 23LC-0006 tells the story of how twenty-seven (27) Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh were traveling home with the help of the Russian Peacekeepers, but when they reached Shushi, they were stopped by the “eco-activists” who were yelling: “[K]arabakh bizimdir!” (Karabakh is ours).

An Azerbaijani man entered the bus demanding the passport of one of the Armenian women. He had a list of names, and he checked her passport with that list. The witness was informed by the

⁶ CFTJ took Witness 23LC-0006’s testimony on April 15, 2023.

ICRC representative that a list of names was sent to Azerbaijan, and the Azerbaijani side would decide whether or not to allow them to return.

Witness 23LC-0006 says:

“[O]ur home was 15 minutes away from us, but we were not allowed to go.”

Witness 23LC-0006 and the rest of the twenty-six (26) travelers were told to return to Goris. Due to the high level of stress and anxiety, the health of three (3) women began to deteriorate. The Russian ambulance was trying to take them to a hospital in Stepanakert, but the Azerbaijanis blocked the road. The “eco-activists” were shouting at them and blocking their passage.

Suddenly, an Azerbaijani ambulance arrived to take the women to a hospital in Shushi. Both the Armenians and the Russians refused this offer. An Azerbaijani ambulance transported one (1) of the women whose health was in critical condition to Stepanakert, and the Russian ambulance transported the other two (2) women and the daughter-in-law of one of the women to Stepanakert in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Witness 23LC-0006 was asked to step out of the vehicle to be interviewed by the Russian side. She wanted to express her feelings about the situation, but instead, she and the rest of the travelers, all twenty-two (22) of them, were forced to return to Goris in Armenia.

Witness 23LC-0006 felt fortunate because she was able to return home to Nagorno-Karabakh three (3) days before Azerbaijan established an official checkpoint on the Lachin Corridor on April 23, 2023, guarded by Azerbaijani servicemen.

2.4 Testimony: Malnourished Baby Faces Illness

Witness 23BLC-11⁷ is a teacher from Askeran, Nagorno-Karabakh, and mother to a 9-month-old baby. During the Lachin Blockade, she described hardships her family was facing, including closing their family auto parts store since they could no longer import the store’s supply from Armenia. Her husband needed to take on other kinds of work, including farming, to support their family. She said:

“We are farming so that our family doesn’t starve. Of course, there are issues with fuel related to farming such as planting the seeds in the field and transporting crops to the capital city and regions with high demand.”

Witness 23BLC-11 had fruit plants, but they were only supplementary as they had not foreseen the need to commit entirely to farming and planting crops in order to feed their family. That year, they were forced to plant crops in their orchard as well.

⁷ CFTJ recorded the testimony of Witness 23BLC-11 on August 15, 2023, in Askeran, Nagorno-Karabakh.

She noted that the real issue, though, was that it was very difficult finding meat; eating just potatoes or beans was not satiable and did not ensure the family's well-being. The issue with the scarcity of meat was firstly due to the shortage of animal grazing land since the majority of their fields had been captured by Azerbaijan, and second, there was a general shortage of animal feed, regardless of extortionate prices.

Witness 23BLC-11 was also stressed about her baby's food as by the next week, the baby formula that she needed to drink until 12 months old was going to run out, and she did not have an alternative to ensure her vitamin needs would be met; there was no porridge, baby biscuits, bananas, and other main fruits that she was allowed to eat.

"Baby formula, dairy, sour cream - there is none to feed the child. Now, I am forced to be creative, and by mixing fruits and rice, I make some type of baby porridge. Sometimes, I'm forced to make it with water if there is no milk."

Because of the new lack of grazing land, they had a difficult time getting milk, and when there was no milk, she could not feed her baby yogurt either. The last time she was able to get baby formula was two weeks prior to giving her testimony in mid-August 2023.

Since her baby had been given baby formula since birth, Witness 23BLC-11 was in a very precarious situation as when her formula finished, she would be unable to restock as pharmacies were empty.

During this time, her baby's immunity suffered, and she had gotten sick with an intestinal infection, losing a fair amount of weight: 1.5 kg. For nearly a week, the baby was physically sick and had diarrhea, and though they were in need of going to the hospital, they cared for her at home. The doctors explained that the reason for her illness was malnutrition, and since children are unable to handle malnutrition, their immunity becomes affected.

The needed medication was typically the most easily found medicine called "Linex," yet they were barely able to find the very last stock of medicine from the pharmacy:

"We narrowly found the other medicine from a few places, tablet by tablet: 2 tablets from here, 2 tablets from there. And those medicines are now unavailable, God forbid this repeats itself; now there are no more of those medicines. The doctors said the reason was malnutrition, that the baby is not receiving the vitamins she requires for her age, including the fruits, soups, and porridges that she would previously eat. We would substitute baby biscuits with bread. The baby would eat bread with such an appetite that each time, I don't know, your heart would be torn to pieces."

In addition to food insecurity, Witness 23BLC-11 was also suffering a very poor supply of basic living and hygiene needs including laundry powder, soap, shower products, toilet paper, dishwashing liquid, and kitchen products.

Thanks to the medications she scraped together, Witness 23BLC-11's baby overcame her illness.

2.5 Testimony: Fuel, Electricity, and Food Shortages

Witness 23LC-NK0030⁸ is a 47-year-old man, who was born and raised in the city of Sumgait in Azerbaijan S.S.R. He lived in Sumgait until 1988, when the pogroms⁹ began. The witness and his family had to flee their home in Sumgait and seek refuge in Stepanakert in Nagorno-Karabakh. The witness served in the Nagorno-Karabakh Defense Army for a significant period of time and held the position of brigade commander and commander of a military unit until 2019. The witness was a participant in the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (early 1990s), the 2016 War, and the 2020 War.

Witness 23LC-NK0030 spoke about how gas and electricity were turned off 3-4 times a day, which were causing dramatic problems in the winter months when the weather is sub-zero with snow on the ground. He states:

“[A]bout 4,700 people have lost their jobs. The Lachin Corridor is not just a road, it is the main artery that delivers food and necessary goods. The international community should not be waiting for people to die in their backyards. This could turn into the blockade of Leningrad.”

In early January of 2023, during the winter months, the food shortages became a crisis.¹⁰ The Nagorno-Karabakh authorities implemented a food rationing system and introduced a coupon system. Witness 23LC-NK0002, states:

“[S]ince the blockade we have had severe food shortages. People stand in long queues regardless of the weather conditions. I stood in line for four hours to get five (5) eggs. Later, people were given food coupons, but we still have to stand in queues. In Stepanakert, my parents and brother stand in queues for groceries every day. Two (2) days ago my brother stood in line for several hours to bring home one (1) kilogram of carrots for our sick mother.”

3.0 Azerbaijan's Offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh - The Final Chapter (2023)

The blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh had turned the region into an open prison for the ethnic Armenians. At the height of the escalating humanitarian and economic crisis, on September 19

⁸ CFTJ recorded the testimony of Witness 23LC-NK0030 on January 25, 2023.

⁹ On the Sumgait Pogrom, a massacre that targeted the Armenian population of the seaside town of Sumgait in the Azerbaijan S.S.R. in late February 1988, see Peter Kenez, A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End (2nd edn, Cambridge University Press 2006) P. 272.

¹⁰

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/02/azerbaijan-blockade-of-lachin-corridor-putting-thousands-of-lives-in-peril-must-be-immediately-lifted/>

and 20, 2023, Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military offensive on Nagorno-Karabakh. The military offensive targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure, coupled with the circulation of open-source videos that showed torture and mutilation of Armenians at the hands of Azerbaijani soldiers. Azerbaijan also published a list of “300 most wanted Armenians.” The psychological trauma, coupled with starvation, and under the shelling and bombardment of the Azerbaijani military was the last chapter for the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh who, under duress and fear, sought a way to escape. After months of blockade, Azerbaijan allowed for the opening of the Lachin Corridor knowing full well that the Armenians would escape to Armenia, finally achieving the goal of ethnically cleansing Nagorno-Karabakh of all Armenians.

3.1 Atrocities and Forced Displacement of Armenians

Despite condemnation of the Lachin Blockade, the humanitarian crisis persisted. On September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan launched a full-scale, unprovoked military offensive toward the Armenian civilian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijani armed forces shelled and advanced into almost every civilian-populated village and town in Nagorno-Karabakh, including the capital Stepanakert, Martuni, Askeran, Martakert, and Taghard. Tens of thousands of civilians were initially barred from evacuation to neighboring Armenia since access via the only humanitarian corridor was still blocked at Lachin. Unverified information has also been dispersed indicating rapes, beheadings, and executions of children and men across social media networks.

Azerbaijan intermittently cut internet connection and forbade access to the region by media, NGOs, civil society groups, or UN special rapporteurs, with atrocities occurring in the dark.

Despite a Russian-mediated Trilateral Statement that was the basis of the ceasefire signed in September 2020, three years later, on September 20, 2023, the ceasefire was violated. In an attempt to end the Azerbaijani military onslaught, the terms of a new ceasefire were established. The Artsakh Defense Army was to be immediately disbanded, laying down their arms, and leaving combat positions. Moreover, the de-facto Nagorno-Karabakh Republic was to be unconditionally surrendered and integrated into mainland Azerbaijan. With the simultaneous surrender of all weapons and heavy equipment, the Azerbaijani government ensured compliance and implementation.

Considering this utter lack of freedom in the foreground of consistent human rights violations, Armenians, under fear and duress, headed for the Lachin Corridor in whatever means they could. The exodus lasted 8 days. 120,000 Armenians escaped to Armenia leaving behind everything they had: homes, personal belongings, churches, cemeteries where their loved ones had been buried for centuries, museums, schools, and all that defined them as the indigenous Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh that dated back to the 4th century. Azerbaijan finally allowed transport through the Lachin Corridor, but only to empty Nagorno-Karabakh of Armenians.

3.2 Detention of Armenian Political Prisoners and POWs

Upon the exodus of Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijani officials detained individuals and leaders of Armenian origin—whose only “crime” was the peaceful exercise of their political rights—under false and fabricated charges.

On May 28, 2023, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan had delivered a speech in Lachin, stating that the Nagorno-Karabakh parliament be dissolved, the president surrendered, and all ministers, deputies, and other government officials step down, with promises of amnesty for prisoners of war.¹¹ In a May 30, 2023, press release, the U.S. Department of State publicly welcomed Azerbaijan’s talk of amnesty and Armenia’s commitment to peace.¹² However, post the capitulation and despite these leaders’ compliance with Aliyev’s conditions to disband the parliament of Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan has reneged on every promise of amnesty.¹³

Among those apprehended are eight former Armenian leaders from Nagorno-Karabakh, including former de facto presidents Arkady Ghukasyan, Bako Sahakyan, and Arayik Harutyunyan. Other political POWs include Ruben Vardanyan, Davit Ishkhanyan, Davit Babayan, Davit Manukyan, and Levon Mnatsakanyan.¹⁴

Sean Murphy — Professor of International Law at George Washington University Law School — at the ICJ argued that these actions are not merely legal proceedings but rather a targeted strategy to punish “these individuals simply based on their role as democratically-elected representatives or as persons charged with the maintenance of security.”¹⁵ The unlawful detention of these representatives, who serve as elected voices of the Armenian people in Nagorno-Karabakh, undermines the peace process and hinders the potential for any meaningful dialogue between the conflicting parties.

During both the Lachin Blockade¹⁶ and 2023 war, Armenian civilians have also been targets of arbitrary arrests with no evidence for the grounds of arrest; for instance, 68-year-old Vagif Khachatryan, whom Azerbaijani soldiers kidnapped while being transferred by the Red Cross to receive medical attention, has been forcibly sentenced to 15 years in prison, the maximum sentence possible for someone of his age in Azerbaijani captivity.¹⁷

¹¹ <https://president.az/en/articles/view/60027#:~:text=Therefore%2C%20there%20is,of%20an%20amnesty.>

¹² <https://www.state.gov/continued-peace-talks-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan/>

¹³ <https://www.cftjjustice.org/cftj-urgent-report-on-azerbajians-detention-of-armenian-political-prisoners-and-pows/>

¹⁴ <https://www.cftjjustice.org/azerbaijan-must-release-all-armenian-political-prisoners-pows-and-hostages/>

¹⁵ <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203210>

¹⁶

<https://www.cftjjustice.org/120000-armenians-under-blockade-imposed-by-azerbaijan-june-29-2023-marks-the-200th-day-of-the-blockade/>

¹⁷

<https://web.archive.org/web/20231119234223/https://en.apa.az/incident/armenian-criminal-vagif-khachatryan-was-sentenced-to-15-years-in-prison-updated-5-video-415746>

In failing to uphold its promises of amnesty of government officials and by undermining the U.S. State Department's public calls on amnesty and good faith peace negotiations, the Azerbaijani government has again highlighted its broader pattern of political suppression and disregard for ethnic Armenian rights. CFTJ has collected ample evidence of human rights violations committed against detainees and POWs held under Azerbaijani custody,¹⁸ providing little doubt that the same will be imposed upon these new political prisoners.¹⁹

3.3 Testimonies of 2023 War and Forced Displacement

3.4 Testimony: Assault toward Minor Searching for Medical Assistance

Witness 23LC-0044²⁰ was born in the Mets Shen Village in the Martakert Province of Nagorno-Karabakh and is 48 years old. During the First Nagorno-Karabakh War in 1992, the witness recalls fleeing their village to the woods because Azerbaijani forces had captured their village Mets Shen. Upon returning to Mets Shen after Armenian forces recaptured the village, she saw that her house had completely been burned and destroyed as a result of bombings by Azerbaijani forces. The witness' family began living in the home next door, which remained standing.

The witness's son was born in Mets Shen Village in 2012, and shortly after, they moved to the village Aghabekalanj one kilometer away from the Martakert district, which is where the witness and her family were as the 2023 war began. On September 19, 2023, the witness had gone to the village administration to purchase goods provided by the Russian peacekeepers at significantly-inflated prices. While making a bread and cheese sandwich at home, she heard a large explosion and witnessed a bomb launched nearby, where there was a military post and cross-stones.

At night, the Azerbaijanis dropped a bomb in Martakert. The people with cars were pleading for gas so that they could flee. On September 24, 2023, she left her son with her neighbor as she went to go find bread. Her son was late to come home, so she went to investigate. The witness saw a relative—who was in the army—in a car, and he told her that they needed to leave by the next day at 10:00 o'clock. She was concerned because she had an old father and 11-year-old son but did not own a vehicle. However, her relative had already taken his six children to Stepanakert and had room in his car to give them a ride.

On September 29, 2023, the witness was taking shelter on the first floor of the Armenia Hotel in Stepanakert. Her father's blood pressure rose and he began to feel ill. Her son stated he was going to the city center towards the Tatik-Papik Monument to find the Red Cross to alert them of his grandfather's condition since the Red Cross would frequently come to the city center.

¹⁸

<https://www.cftjustice.org/submission-by-the-center-for-truth-and-justice-to-the-un-special-rapporteur-on-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading-treatment-and-punishment-pertaining-to-the-mistreatment-of-armenian-pows/>

¹⁹ <https://www.cftjustice.org/white-paper-of-the-torture-mistreatment-of-armenian-pows-2/>

²⁰ CFTJ took Witness 23LC-0006's testimony on October 24, 2023.

While the 11-year-old went to get outside help, the witness searched inside the building for a doctor. On the second floor, she saw two men who were with the National Security Service. They came to check on his condition and pronounced him dead on the spot. They warned her not to make any fuss in order to not cause a panic. She quietly hugged him and they took the body away. Meanwhile, the witness was alerted that her son's leg was injured. She felt truly alone.

The witness went to the Parliament building because her son had been taken there following his injury. One woman there told the witness not to fear because she was a medic. The blood was gushing, and the medic wrapped his leg. The witness asked her son what had happened. He replied:

“Mom, I’m not well, I’m not well, they shot me.”

She was confused, replying, “Are you crazy, how would they shoot you?” He kept reiterating that his foot was in great pain, and the blood would not stop flowing. He explained that prior to being shot, there were two Azerbaijani army cars. After hearing a noise, he felt that his foot heated up. He then took off his shoe and saw the blood. The medic said a tetanus vaccine needed to be administered.

The witness saw that there were buses outside. She carried her son on board, and the bus took them to Vayk, Armenia, where he received a shot and his leg was re-wrapped. The medical staff at Vayk said that his leg was in serious condition. They eventually directed them to Abovyan Hospital on October 1, 2023, where an x-ray revealed a bullet was inside his foot. Besides the bullet, there was also a piece of a shoe and a piece of a rock inside his foot, and his bone was also damaged. Her son was operated on at Arabkir Children's Hospital and stayed there for approximately 15 days. He is to have gotten his cast off on November 15, 2023.

Today, the witness lives in Arzni Village in the Kotayk Province of Armenia, while her mother's, brother's, and aunt's graves are in Mets Shen. Her son asks if they can visit the graves at least once every two or three months. The witness hopes he will make a full recovery.

3.5 Testimony: Wounded Evacuees from Nagorno-Karabakh

Witness 23LC-0047²¹ is a 67-year-old man born in the Taghut village of Hadrut, Nagorno-Karabakh. His parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents are also from Taghut, and their graves are located there. In 2002, due to lack of work, he and his wife moved to Berkadzor, Nagorno-Karabakh. There, they had 20 beehives (the cost of each 50,000 drams), an Opel, Kamaz vehicles, vegetable garden, and vineyard that yielded one and a half tons of grapes, pear, and apple trees, all of which helped his family during the blockade. When he left Berkadzor in September 2023, he did not manage to take anything with him. In Nagorno-Karabakh, along with his brother's family, he left behind 5 houses. The witness noted that he last saw the graves of his

²¹ CFTJ took Witness 23LC-0047's testimony on October 25, 2023, in Yerevan, Armenia.

relatives before the war of 2020 and does not know what state the graves are in now [since they had not been able to return after the region fell under Azerbaijani control in 2020].

The witness stated that there was no transport due to lack of fuel during the Lachin Blockade and so his grandson used to come to the village by bicycle from the city of Stepanakert, which is 7 km away from Berkadzor, to take bread home because there was no bread in Stepanakert. Since their family took everything in large quantities, they were able to live, but he notes that life was difficult in Stepanakert.

On September 19, 2023, the witness said that he was asleep when the war started and that it was half past one or half past twelve. The witness, his wife, and their grandson gathered to go to the shelter, a house made of concrete; however, after going 700-800 meters, a shell hit, and the car was damaged. When the projectile fell on the car, the witness stated that his vision turned white, the car windows were broken, his grandson was screaming, and his wife's arm seemed to be broken as blood flowed profusely. His grandson had shrapnel injuries in his lung and leg, so they were taken to the Stepanakert Hospital by ambulance. The witness was also injured, albeit minorly, in the head area.

They stayed in the hospital from September 19 to September 25. On September 25 — when the Berkadzor gas explosion happened — the whole hospital was full of people with burns, and because his grandson was very scared, they took him to the witness's son-in-law's house in Stepanakert. The witness states that they decided to leave the country when the Azerbaijanis started killing women and children in Martakert [during the 2023 war] and that Armenians and Azerbaijanis cannot live together because the Azerbaijanis are known for committing such murders. They then set off on a 40-hour journey to Kornidzor, Armenia, in their own Kamaz container car because it was not possible to transport his wife and his grandson to Yerevan by ambulance. They were four people and did not manage to take anything from their house.

The witness states that on September 26, they left the house at 4 am and traveled for about 42-43 hours to reach the Hakari bridge at the Lachin Corridor, which typically only takes an hour to an hour and a half to reach by Kamaz; these queues were caused by the illegal Azerbaijani checkpoint. At the checkpoint, the Azerbaijanis talked to the witness and asked where his grandson was hit. The witness answered that it happened in the village, and the Azerbaijani replied that they had not hit villages. The Azerbaijanis helped the witness's injured grandson get out of the car so that the car could pass through the scanner.

While on the road, there was a person who has come and asked the witness, "Is there any bread? My child is hungry. Is there even a piece of bread?" Everyone was hungry and thirsty. They covered a pregnant woman with a blanket so that she could give birth:

“I saw 4 children born on the road, and I later learned a 55-year-old woman from our neighboring village died because her heart could not withstand the situation.”

The witness says that his injured grandson was constantly crying and was in severe pain because there was a fragment in his body. The witness says that he himself was also in pain; his back and legs hurt, and when the weather was sunny on the road, he would throw a blanket on the ground and lay down to rest his back. He did this until reaching Kornidzor, where his son came to meet him in an ambulance. The witness then gave the car to his son and went to lie down in another car because he was not in any condition to drive. His grandson was brought to Tsereteli Children's Hospital, where the fragment in his lung was operated on. After 15-20 days, he underwent another surgery, this time to remove a fragment from his leg. He was discharged from the hospital on October 22.

The witness now lives in Yerevan.

4.0 Azerbaijan Must be Held Accountable for Conducting a Mass Exodus of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh

The unfolding events in Nagorno-Karabakh, from the 2020 war to the 2023 offensive, reveal a disturbing pattern of human rights violations, ethnic cleansing, and disregard for international law on the part of Azerbaijan towards the ethnic Armenian population.

The Lachin Blockade, initiated by Azerbaijan in December 2022, marked a grave violation of international law and humanitarian norms. This 9-month-long blockade, purportedly for environmental reasons, led to dire consequences for the 120,000 Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. Severe restrictions on the movement of goods and essential services caused widespread starvation and prompted legal experts to assert Azerbaijan's actions constituted “a reasonable basis to believe that a Genocide is being committed against Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023,” according to former ICC Chief Prosecutor Luis Ocampo.²²

The 2023 military offensive by Azerbaijan, in violation of the 2020 ceasefire agreement, witnessed brutal atrocities against the Armenian population. The indiscriminate shelling of civilian-populated areas, denial of evacuation routes, and reports of heinous acts such as indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian targets such as schools and homes, as well as Armenian corpses that showed beheadings and ears cut off, all amount to crimes against humanity and violations of international law and rules of war.

Following the invasion, Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh became victims of ethnic cleansing, also facing detention on the basis of their ethnic origins. Azerbaijan's breach of promises

²²

<https://www.cftjustice.org/former-international-criminal-court-prosecutor-luis-moreno-ocampo-issued-report-stating-the-blockade-of-nagorno-karabakh-is-genocide/>

regarding amnesty for political leaders and its arbitrary arrests further undermine the peace process; the detention of democratically-elected representatives is not only a violation of human rights but also a strategic move to suppress voices crucial for meaningful dialogue. The actions of the Azerbaijani government not only contradict the U.S. State Department's calls for amnesty and peace but also underscore a pattern of political suppression and disregard for ethnic Armenian rights.

In the ongoing case concerning the *Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (Armenia v. Azerbaijan), the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on November 17, 2023, issued an Order regarding the provisional measures raised by Armenia on September 28, 2023, following the ethnic-cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh. The court has since ordered Azerbaijan to:

- “(i) ensure that persons who have left Nagorno-Karabakh after 19 September 2023 and who wish to return to Nagorno-Karabakh are able to do so in a safe, unimpeded and expeditious manner;
- (ii) ensure that persons who remained in Nagorno-Karabakh after 19 September 2023 and who wish to depart are able to do so in a safe, unimpeded and expeditious manner; and
- (iii) ensure that persons who remained in Nagorno-Karabakh after 19 September 2023 or returned to Nagorno-Karabakh and who wish to stay are free from the use of force or intimidation that may cause them to flee.”²³

According to the compliance standards of the ICJ, Azerbaijan is expected to uphold the protection and preservation of identity, registration, and private property documents in administrative and legislative practices as well.

The imposition of a ceasefire demanded on Azerbaijan’s terms fails to bring an end to future attacks on Armenians, making urgent intervention and fact-finding missions imperative to assess and address the humanitarian crisis. The futile and impractical UN mission to Nagorno-Karabakh — led by the UN Resident Coordinator in Azerbaijan on October 1, 2023, days after ethnic cleansing — fails to provide unbiased data, evidently, as they noted “they saw no damage to civilian public infrastructure,”²⁴ contrary to eye-witness testimonies and open-source evidence.

The forced displacement, blockades, and atrocities against Armenians demand urgent attention from the UN, international NGOs, and human rights advocates. CFTJ calls for immediate fact-finding missions to investigate humanitarian breaches and facilitate lasting human rights protections for Armenians. The plight of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh underscores the need

²³ <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/180/180-20231117-pre-01-00-en.pdf>

²⁴

<https://web.archive.org/web/20231003173353/https://azerbaijan.un.org/en/248051-un-team-completes-mission-karabakh>

for a concerted effort to ensure the principles of justice, fundamental rights, and the right of return are upheld in the face of ongoing crises. Azerbaijan must be held accountable for conducting a mass exodus of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, in conjunction with guaranteeing Armenians a safe and secure return to their homes and indigenous lands.

4.1 Conclusion

The closure of the Lachin Corridor — the 9-month long blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh — that severed restrictions on the movement of goods, medicine, and essential services, widespread starvation, the illegal search and arrest of Armenians traveling in ICRC vehicles, followed by an aggressive war initiated by Azerbaijan on the peaceful population of Nagorno-Karabakh, the indiscriminate shelling and bombing of civilians and infrastructures, combined with the terrorizing footage circulated on social media showing the slaughter and murder of Armenians, the publication of a list of “300 wanted Armenians,” all combined with the forced displacement of the Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh — where they had lived for centuries — created severe fear and duress for the innocent population of Nagorno-Karabakh. All the steps that Azerbaijan took were calculated in order to coerce the Armenians of the region to flee for their lives to Armenia.

The arrest of eight political leaders by Azerbaijan, who are currently being held in captivity in Baku, has one simple message for the 120,000 Armenians that fled to Armenia: “If you return to Nagorno-Karabakh, you too will either be killed or arrested.”

Today, for the first time in history, Nagorno-Karabakh stands devoid of its indigenous Armenian population. There is only one reason for the mass deportations of this population: racial discrimination. The people of Nagorno-Karabakh have the right to live on their lands, but they cannot return to their homes, lands, churches, cemeteries, schools, and they cannot live where their ancestors have lived and died for one reason alone: They are Armenian.

The Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh were targeted, terrorized, maimed, killed, expelled, and forcefully deported out of their indigenous lands by Azerbaijan. However, their right to return and live on their lands remains inalienable and must be protected and pursued.