

## In the Blink of an Eye: The Long Road from Karabakh to Armenia

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### Contextual Overview:

More than two months have passed since the escalation of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, which forced almost the entire ethnic Armenian population to flee. Despite Baku's commitment to respecting the rights of ethnic Armenians, most have hastily fled the region, fearing violence or potential loss of their freedom to use their language and practice their religion and customs. According to various estimates, a few dozen ethnic Armenians remain in Nagorno-Karabakh, who do not want to flee for different reasons: They do not want to leave the graves of their relatives, some are still hoping to find their missing children, others have taken it upon themselves to care for their elderly parents or the stray animals left behind.

During the six-week war in 2020, Azerbaijan recaptured from Armenian forces vast areas of Nagorno-Karabakh and its neighboring territories that had been held for three decades. As a result of this war, some 37,000 people found refuge in Armenia<sup>1</sup>, and several thousand people from the captured territories moved to the central part of Karabakh, which was still under Armenian control at the time. Over 6,000 people (from both sides) were killed in the fighting, that ended in a Russian-brokered peace agreement. Moscow sent about 2,000 peacekeepers to the region<sup>2</sup>. After the 2020 war, there was a faint hope in Armenian society that a peacekeeping force would provide stability for a while and allow Armenia and Karabakh to recover a little from the devastating shock of the war. However, these hopes were not fulfilled. Not only did the peacekeeping contingent do nothing to ensure the security of the Armenian population in Karabakh, but it did not even have a clear mandate to act in the region<sup>3</sup>.

After the mass exodus of Armenians in September 2023, the streets of the regional capital, which Armenians call Stepanakert and Azerbaijanis call Khankendi, were left empty and littered with rubbish and smoking piles of burnt belongings and documents. During the exodus, Azerbaijani authorities arrested several former members of the Karabakh government and called on ethnic Azerbaijanis who fled the region during the First Karabakh War three decades ago to return. In their daily bulletin from 23 November, Russian peacekeepers report that since 19 September they have dismantled 12 permanent and 16 temporary monitoring posts in the region. As contradictory as it may sound, the Russian peacekeeping contingent continues to fulfil tasks at 18 monitoring posts, informing Baku of its activities aimed at ensuring security and respect for humanitarian law with regard to the [missing] civilian population<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Persons in a refugee-like situation, accessed: 03.12.2023, URL: <https://www.unhcr.org/am/en/persons-in-refugee-like-situation>.

<sup>2</sup> Sargsyan L., Russian peacekeepers in Artsakh: Ambiguity of the rules of engagement, published: 19.05.2021, accessed: 25.11.2023, URL: <https://evnreport.com/politics/russian-peacekeepers-in-artsakh/>.

<sup>3</sup> Post-war Prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh, published: 09.06.2021, accessed: 03.12.2023, URL: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/264-post-war-prospects-nagorno-karabakh>.

<sup>4</sup> Information bulletin of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation on the activities of the Russian peacekeeping contingent in the zone of the Karabakh economic region of the Republic of Azerbaijan, published: 23.09.2023, accessed: 25.11.2023, URL: [https://mil.ru/russian\\_peacekeeping\\_forces/bulletins/more.htm?id=12487279@egNews](https://mil.ru/russian_peacekeeping_forces/bulletins/more.htm?id=12487279@egNews).

The exodus from Nagorno-Karabakh began almost immediately after Azerbaijani forces took control of the region. Within days, it was all over: Almost the entire population of the territory fled, leaving behind everything they could not carry. *"A week before 19 September, we already felt that there were large movements of Azerbaijani troops in the area of Aknaghbyur and Avetaranots villages. That day was an ordinary morning, nobody thought that a battle would start, we have been used since the nineties that an attack usually happens at dawn, at 5-6 am, this time the battle started in the afternoon of 19 September, at one o'clock,"* - recalls Hovik, former head of Karmir village in Nagorno-Karabakh<sup>5</sup>. No one expected it could happen in just a few days. Hundreds of cars, with a lifetime's worth of belongings on their roofs, moved slowly along the Lachin Corridor, the only road between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. Then buses, trucks and ambulances lined up in long queues on the mountain road. *"My husband lost his leg during the First Karabakh War, in 1992," - said Karine, a displaced woman from Martakert, - "We were afraid that once the Turkish border guards started questioning us, they would realize that Zhorik was a war veteran and wouldn't allow him to cross the border. We thought it would be right for him to drive the car past the military outpost on the Hakari Bridge and thus go unnoticed. That's what happened. We were told to walk, while my husband crossed the bridge by car. I covered his legs with a jacket so that they wouldn't notice anything and ask questions. There were fears that men who had participated in the war would not be allowed out of Artakh, so we were lucky"*<sup>6</sup>. More than 60 people died during the arduous and slow journey, which took more than 40 hours. The exodus followed a nine-month blockade of the region by Azerbaijan, which left many people suffering from malnutrition, dehydration and lack of medicine.

For months, since 12 December 2022, Azerbaijan has blocked the Lachin Corridor, the only and therefore vital road connecting Armenia and Karabakh. The people of Artsakh relied on Armenia for medicine and emergency medical care, and for the transportation of basic goods and supplies, including food. The purpose of the blockade was to starve the population of Nagorno-Karabakh and put psychological pressure on them. The blockade was also timed to coincide with the middle of winter. The Azerbaijani government shut down the pipeline carrying natural gas from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh and also disrupted the electricity grid, leaving the local population unable to heat their homes, schools and businesses, while power cuts continued to cause hardship. The main aim was ethnic cleansing by forcibly displacing local Armenians from their homes when the road was opened.

After Azerbaijan imposed a blockade on Karabakh in December 2022, the Government of Armenia formed a special working group to address the humanitarian problems of the population. It subsequently evolved into the "Humanitarian Centre", which was established near Kornidzor village at the entrance to the Lachin Corridor from the Armenian side. Following Azerbaijan's large-scale attack on 19 September, the Humanitarian Centre was tasked with managing the reception and immediate accommodation needs of the forcibly displaced<sup>7</sup>. Refugees<sup>8</sup> were then directed to Goris, the nearest Armenian town to the border with

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<sup>5</sup> Davtyan A., Makiyan H., "You can recreate the home-place, but you cannot recreate the homeland": the head of the village from Artsakh, Hovik Petrosyan, published: 30.11.2023, accessed: 02.12.2023 URL: <https://rb.gy/6jg3b5>.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with the displaced family from Karabakh at the Metsamor Hotel, 15.10.2023.

<sup>7</sup> Abrahamyan G., Services available for the forcibly displaced from Artsakh, published: 03.10.2023, accessed: 26.11.2023, URL: <https://evnreport.com/new-updates/services-available-for-the-forcibly-displaced-from-artsakh/>.

<sup>8</sup> In the text, the terms refugee and forcibly displaced person are used interchangeably and equally.

Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, for registration. From there, within days, buses were organized to redirect refugees to cities across the country.

### **Current Circumstances: Encompassing Legal Status, Humanitarian Conditions and Housing-Related Issues**

With a population of 2.8 million and a poverty rate of around 25%<sup>9</sup>, Armenia could face significant difficulties in meeting the needs of the displaced as winter approaches. Of the approximately 102,000 refugees, more than half are women and girls, almost a third are children and almost a fifth are elderly<sup>10</sup>. About half of the refugee population are from the countryside. Agriculture was once the second largest employment sector after the military. It was one of the main sources of income and activity for Karabakh Armenians. *"It's difficult for a person who has devoted his life to cultivating the land to stay within four walls. Everything grew in our garden. We had a cattle shed and produced everything we needed: fruit, vegetables, cheese, milk, yogurt, etc. In one day we lost everything we'd created for years. Now I have to start all over again, although at my age it's hard to do so,"* - said Slavik with regret<sup>11</sup>. Various governmental and non-governmental programmes are being implemented to provide employment opportunities, mainly for teachers, doctors, journalists and other professionals from Karabakh. However, many business and agricultural professionals who have left everything behind - their livestock, farmland and shops - are now forced to start from scratch. Their entire lives have been uprooted. In the coming months, they will have to rebuild their lives: find homes, jobs, and personal belongings, since most arrived with virtually nothing.

Currently, most refugees live in overcrowded apartments or hotels provided by friends, relatives, or the government. Although everyone has a roof over their head, many live in emergency premises without any basic amenities, where there are no proper windows, insulation and/or heating, no furniture and/or toilets. With the current prices on the rental market, it is almost impossible to find a proper flat at a reasonable price. A smaller portion of the community is unhoused, living in schools and kindergartens while waiting for more permanent housing. There is an urgent need to address long-term housing and prepare structures for the cold weather, otherwise it could lead to people moving again in search of better housing and job conditions. The refugee population left their homes during the warmer weather with only the most essential items they could carry. This has left the population being ill-prepared for winter conditions.

According to the latest estimates by the World Health Organization, almost a fifth of refugees in Armenia are experiencing mental health problems after a very difficult exodus<sup>12</sup>. Anjela, a forcibly displaced from Karabakh, recalls the day of displacement - *"That day, 29 September, was extremely hard. There were*

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<sup>9</sup> Social snapshot and poverty in Armenia, 2023 // Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, URL: <https://armstat.am/en/?nid=82&id=2617>.

<sup>10</sup> Arellano E.B., 'Which future do we have?': Stories from refugees in Armenia, published: 21.11.2023, accessed: 26.11.2023, URL: <https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/story/which-future-do-we-have-stories-from-families-fleeing-nagorno-karabakh/>.

<sup>11</sup> Tovmasyan Kh., Hotel "Metsamor" - temporary accommodation, published: 08.11.2023, accessed: 02.12.2023, URL: <https://rb.gy/z49yrl>.

<sup>12</sup> "With a little help, everybody here can move on. Nobody is hopeless." Scaling up mental health and psychosocial services for Armenian refugees, published: 10.11.2023, accessed: 26.11.2023, URL: <https://rb.gy/3424h6>.

*very few people left in Stepanakert. We were very scared. My son and I were in the main square of Stepanakert for 3 days, day and night. On the 29th of September the last buses were leaving for Armenia. We managed to get on one of those buses*<sup>13</sup>. " Displaced people struggle to cope with a range of social and psychological problems caused by emergencies, including death of family members, lack of security, family separation, loss of livelihoods and disruption of social networks. This is exacerbated by the extremely short period of displacement, which has made it impossible for refugees to process the shock. For many Karabakh Armenians, this is not the first experience of forced displacement. Many of them went through it in the early 1990s and after the Second Karabakh War. *"I wanted to set my house on fire, but I didn't have the courage, so I washed the dishes and arranged them as if a guest had come to visit. .... There were lots of persimmons on the trees this year. Let the Turks [Azerbaijanis, ed.] eat them. I wrote a letter saying that this house was inhabited by honest, pious people, so please keep it clean. I also asked them to water my flowers. This was the second time I left the house; the first time was in Sumgait. I do not want to leave the house third time. I did not live in the times of my youth; I do not live now... I grew old building houses"* - the heartbreaking story of a displaced woman was recorded in the memoirs by Narine Vardanyan, a volunteer from the Goris registration centre for refugees from Karabakh<sup>14</sup>.

The status of displaced persons is currently the subject of serious dispute. On October 26, the Armenian government approved the establishment of a "temporary protected status" designed for displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan emphasized that this newly introduced status aims to protect the rights of those affected within both the local and international contexts<sup>15</sup>. The eligibility criteria for this temporary protected status include all persons who are officially registered as residents of Nagorno-Karabakh, persons who are currently residing in Armenia or abroad whose last registered address was in Nagorno-Karabakh, and persons who were not initially registered in Nagorno-Karabakh but had been living there and were subsequently registered by the Migration and Citizenship Service of Armenia, having entered the country after September 19. Prime Minister Pashinyan said that another alternative for former Karabakh residents is to pursue Armenian citizenship. This statement, however, caused surprise and offence among many Karabakh Armenians who believed they were already citizens, given that they had been issued Armenian passports since 1999<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, the passports were issued under an agreement between the Ministers of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic specifically as international travel documents. Karabakh Armenians have never had access to the political rights granted to Armenian citizens, including the right to vote. The latter was directly related to the place of registration. Following the government's decision of 26 October, whereby the entire population of Karabakh with

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<sup>13</sup> Davtyan A., Makiyan H., Sarkisova A., Baghdasaryan S., Forcible displacement. Elderly mother and son with mental health problems do not want to be separated, published: 24.11.2023, accessed: 02.12.2023, URL: <https://hetq.am/hy/article/162299>.

<sup>14</sup> The quote is taken from the Facebook page of Narine Vardanyan dated 29.09.2023.

<sup>15</sup> Badalyan S., Armenian citizenship of Karabakh refugees called into question, published: 25.10.2023, accessed: 26.11.2023, URL: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32653936.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Shahverdyan L., Armenia to offer refugee status to displaced Karabakhis, published: 30.10.2023, accessed: 26.11.2023, URL: <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-to-offer-refugee-status-to-displaced-karabakhis>.

passports of the Republic of Armenia were de facto deprived of Armenian citizenship, forcibly displaced persons faced many new problems in entering state and registered jobs or travelling out of the country<sup>17</sup>.

From the very beginning, the Armenian government has adopted the decision and procedure to provide a one-time financial assistance of 100,000 AMD (about \$250) to each registered forcibly displaced person from Karabakh. In addition, each registered refugee will receive 50,000 AMD (about \$120) from the state for six months to rent an apartment and cover utility expenses. Yet, unfortunately, there is a significant communication gap to bring these short-term solutions to the different segments of the displaced population. Many elderly people do not know how and where to get this financial assistance, how to prepare documents to get a pension in Armenia, etc.

### **Humanitarian Assistance: Exploring Support Policies Directed towards Refugees by Internal and External Actors**

By early October 2023, the vast majority of refugees had already moved from the south to the central part of the country, around Yerevan. Those left behind were mostly either elderly or disabled, or had no relatives in Armenia to support them. Refugees are currently settled in different regions of Armenia, with the largest numbers living in Yerevan (38%), Syunik (16%), Kotayk (8%) and Ararat (7%)<sup>18</sup>. Most refugees settled in areas where they had relatives, access to the services and assistance. According to unofficial data, more than 6,000 refugees have already left Armenia for other countries.

Over the past 30 years, Armenia has experienced several waves of ethnic Armenian migration: hundreds of thousands of Armenians have moved to Armenia from Azerbaijan, Iraq, Syria and now Karabakh. Despite dialectal and some minor socio-cultural differences between Karabakh Armenians and the host Armenian population in Armenia, after the Karabakh war in 2020 and the mass exodus in September 2023, Armenian society is more or less ready to integrate the newcomers. However, full integration will depend primarily on the economic situation and opportunities to enter the labor market.

The arrival of forcibly displaced Armenians from Karabakh has created many short- and long-term challenges. A spirit of solidarity and generosity has marked the response of host communities, with families opening their doors to refugees. Volunteers, national and local NGOs and representatives of civil society have come together to help those in need. For more than 10 days, field camps were set up in the border towns of Goris and Vayk with temporary field kitchens and medical stations, as well as humanitarian aid from various local and international organizations. A huge human effort was organized by local people who sheltered thousands of refugees into their homes. Several hundred teenagers volunteered for more than a week at the camps without a rest. Many stories of human resilience and caring remain untold from those days<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Grigoryan T., The problem of integration of Artsakh citizens and the Government's problematic way of working, published: 29.11.2023, accessed: 02.12.2023, URL: <https://rb.gy/1n4izk>.

<sup>18</sup> Armenia Refugee Response Plan - October 2023 - March 2024, published: 07.10.2023, accessed: 25.11.2023, URL: <https://rb.gy/bc1h3y>.

<sup>19</sup> Merdinyan, I., From Vayk's Registration Center in Search of Aida, published: 01.12.2023, accessed: 03.12.2023, URL: <https://evnreport.com/spotlight-karabakh/from-vayks-registration-center-in-search-of-aida/>.

At the same time, humanitarian partners, including UN agencies, international NGOs and civil society organizations (as well as Diaspora organizations), under the overall leadership of the Government of the Republic of Armenia, expanded their activities to complement the national response through coordinated and integrated activities aimed at addressing urgent livelihood needs and enhancing the resilience of both refugees and host communities. Thus, the Armenia Emergency Refugee Response Plan<sup>20</sup> was launched on 7 October. The plan provides \$97 million assistance for six months, until the end of March 2024. It aims to support 231,000 people, including 136,000 refugees (after both the 2020 war and the 2023 mass exodus) and 95,000 members of local host communities<sup>21</sup>. In addition, a number of countries have already offered financial and non-financial assistance to Armenia. In total, the EU and 15 countries have announced assistance worth \$66.3 million<sup>22</sup>.

However, many issues are still open and lack a clear and systematized answer or response mechanism. Despite these short-term solutions, which were also made possible by the active participation of the Armenian public and civil society, the main task of the Government of Armenia is to realize the medium- and long-term integration of the Karabakh people settled in Armenia.

As noted above, almost half of all refugees are women and girls. In situations of displacement, they may be exposed to increased protection risks such as gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, trafficking and labor exploitation. In addition, with thousands of men killed in the war in Karabakh, women are often left alone to care for children and other dependents. Single mothers and families with several children are particularly vulnerable to poverty. Thus the risk of multidimensional poverty among refugees, especially among vulnerable groups such as single women, female-headed households, children, people with chronic diseases and disabilities, people living with HIV, LGBTIQ+ people and older people, is very high.

The main question remains whether Karabakh Armenians will be given the opportunity to return in the short or long term. Many displaced people say they would consider returning for their property if they could do so under international protection. Some would consider a longer-term return with their families if Azerbaijan ensure access to education in the Armenian language and provide concrete guarantees protecting people's ability to exercise civil, political, religious, and cultural rights without discrimination. Nevertheless, the main wish of the displaced Armenians is to be able to visit the graves of their relatives, at least once or twice a year, perhaps on specially agreed dates such as Easter or 2 May, traditionally a cemetery day for Karabakh Armenians.

*The material was prepared as part of a project supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and Kvinna Till Kvinna, "Encouraging Conflict Transformation by Critically Rethinking Conflict-Related History and Strengthening Women's Perspectives". SIDA and Kvinna till Kvinna may disagree with the views presented here. Only the author is responsible for the content of the material.*

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<sup>20</sup> Armenia Refugee Response Plan - October 2023 - March 2024, published: 07.10.2023, accessed: 25.11.2023, URL: <https://rb.gy/bc1h3y>.

<sup>21</sup> Armenia: UN launches urgent appeal to help refugees fleeing Karabakh, published: 07.10.2023, accessed: 02.12.2023, URL: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1142017>.

<sup>22</sup> Nazaretyan H., Foreign aid for forcibly displaced Artsakh Armenians, published: 07.10.2023, accessed: 26.11.2023, URL: <https://evnreport.com/new-updates/foreign-aid-for-forcibly-displaced-artsakh-armenians/>.