

Testimony of Jared Genser¹

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

“Human Rights in Azerbaijan Since the COP 29 UN Climate Change Conference”

April 29, 2025

Co-Chair Smith, Co-Chair McGovern, and Members of the Commission,

Thank you for having me testify here before you today.

In my remarks today, I will first provide some important context about the human rights situation in Azerbaijan today, including after COP29. And then I will focus substantial attention on the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and the plight of my client Ruben Vardanyan, who is a former State Counselor and one of eight Armenian Christian political prisoners detained by Azerbaijan. I would also note there are an additional 15 Armenian POWs detained as well.

In short, while President Ilham Aliyev has worked hard to create a global image that he is a statesman, a peacemaker, and leader on interreligious dialogue, he is, in fact, a dictator who has ruled his people with an iron fist since 2003. The independent reviews of his leadership could not be more damning.

According to Freedom House’s Freedom in the World Report 2025, Azerbaijan received a total score of only 7/100, putting it between Afghanistan and Belarus. Aliyev was most recently “re-elected” in February 2024, in an election widely criticized as being neither free nor fair. In addition, according to the Union for the Freedom of Political Prisoners, Azerbaijan today holds at least 357 political prisoners, which doesn’t even include the Armenian Christians. Transparency International ranked Azerbaijan as 154 out of 180 countries in its Corruption Perceptions Index. It highlighted in its reporting that the regime spent “millions and millions of euros on bribing individuals capable of shaping public opinion in democratic countries.” And Reporters Without Borders ranked Azerbaijan as 164 of 180 countries in its World Press Freedom Index. It observed that “virtually the entire media sector is under official control” and that “no independent television or radio is transmitted from within the country, and all print newspapers with a critical stance have been shut down.” It should come as no surprise that since COP29 last November, Aliyev has only tightened his grip on power, believing the world is distracted with the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, among others.

Now let me turn to the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh more specifically. In September 2023, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan launched an ethnic cleansing campaign in the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, forcing 120,000 ethnic Armenian Christians to flee into Armenia, dissolving its institutions, and decapitating and imprisoning its leadership.

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It has been more than 18 months since my client Ruben Vardanyan was detained by Azerbaijan. A devout Armenian Christian and respected philanthropist and businessman, Ruben was taken as a political prisoner in September 2023. His actual crime? Simply advocating for the dignity and rights of self-determination of the Armenian Christian people of Nagorno-Karabakh, a region in the South Caucasus that Armenians call Artsakh. Since the ethnic cleansing, Azerbaijan has only accelerated its longstanding efforts to sweep away any trace of Armenian Christian presence in the region. In a report published last year, the Center for Truth & Justice documented numerous examples from among the 500 historic sites and 6,000 Armenian monuments, including churches and monasteries, which had been desecrated or destroyed.

And Ruben's ongoing imprisonment remains a powerful symbol of Aliyev's ongoing brutality. He faces life in prison if convicted by the Baku Military Court on more than 40 fabricated charges. The allegations against him are patently outrageous. As just one example, Ruben co-founded and served on the Board of Directors of the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative, an independent NGO that helps those in need around the world. Yet Azerbaijan has asserted that this NGO, which is independently audited, has been a vehicle for Ruben to finance terrorism. His trial has also been a mockery of justice with egregious due process abuses including the illegal trial in the military tribunal, lack of access to the fully translated indictment and all alleged evidence, secret hearings closed to the public, and denied access to me as his international lawyer. Along the way, despite Aliyev's claims that Ruben is a terrorist and his imprisonment has nothing to do with his being an Armenian Christian, Ruben has been repeatedly denied access to the Bible. And he was subjected to torture during the first of two hunger strikes he conducted to protest his imprisonment and that of the other Armenian Christian prisoners.

There is one glimmer of hope with regards to the Armenian Christian political prisoners. Azerbaijan and Armenia have reportedly agreed to most of the terms of a peace deal. President Trump, when running for President last October put out a Truth Social post where he said that what Aliyev had done in Nagorno-Karabakh was an ethnic cleansing and he said if elected he would stand for persecuted Christians. It is therefore heartening that President Aliyev has been told by the most senior officials in the Trump Administration that the Armenian Christian prisoners need to be released either before or as part of any peace agreement. That said, dictators never release prisoners because they are asked, only when they have to because it is the least-worst choice among a lot of bad options. Therefore, to compel Aliyev to release the prisoners, the Trump Administration, U.S. Congress, and other like-minded regional organizations, governments, NGOs, and the media around the world must take both public and private action to demonstrate there will be real and serious consequences if he fails to act. I look forward to discussing these issues further with all of you.