



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

### **Human Rights in Azerbaijan Since the Fall of Nagorno-Karabakh**

**Rep. Chris Smith, Co-Chairman**

**September 19, 2024**

Good morning and welcome to everyone joining us this morning. We are here today, on the one-year anniversary of the fall of Nagorno-Karabakh to the army of Azerbaijan, for an update on human rights in Azerbaijan since the fall of Nagorno-Karabakh.

We have an extraordinarily distinguished panel of witnesses, and I will introduce them in a moment, right now I want to recognize that we have in the room with us today many distinguished guests, leaders of the Armenian church, of Armenian-American organizations, supporters of Armenia – many of these supporters are not of Armenian origin, but have rallied to their defense at a critical moment in Armenian history.

I want to thank you all for coming here today to consider what can be done, today, for Nagorno-Karabakh – for the very few Armenians who remain there, but also for the political prisoners and POWs held by the government of Azerbaijan, to protect Armenian cultural heritage, and to

uphold their right to return, one day, to live in peace and freedom in Nagorno-Karabakh.

In June and early September of last year, during the blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh by the armed forces of Azerbaijan, I chaired two hearings, at this commission, on the blockade and developing ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh, where ethnic Armenians have lived for 2,500 years.

One of our distinguished witnesses, Luis Moreno Ocampo, the former Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, testified, and this was in the final weeks of the blockade, on his report which explained how the very blockade itself, an attempt to starve out the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, itself constituted the crime of **genocide** under the Genocide Convention. I immediately [sent](#) the testimony and documentation to President Biden – I received no response.

In 2021 President Biden's recognition of the Armenian genocide of 1915 - I applaud that overdue recognition. But it makes a sad and shameful contrast to his administration's silence and diplomatic doublespeak during the 2023 genocide.

We know what happened last September: having starved the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh right to the edge of mass famine, the government of Azerbaijan sent in its army to occupy the territory, and, in

well-founded fear of their lives, the Armenians left Nagorno-Karabakh for the Republic of Armenia.

I want to begin by stating very clearly that the genocidal blockade followed by ethnic cleansing of last year was a *monstrous injustice*. Some might say, “*well, it’s time to move on.*” ***No, it’s not time to move on.*** The ethnic Armenians **continue** to have a **right** to live in peace and freedom in Nagorno-Karabakh, according to their faith and traditions. They have not surrendered that, that has not lapsed. The Armenians give every sign that they are willing to live in peace – it is the government of Azerbaijan’s long record of savage genocidal threats against the Armenians that prevents them from exercising that right today. It is a long record of unspeakable and depraved atrocities committed against them, including around the 2020 war, that prevents them from living in their homeland. But their *right* itself remains – it is not abolished by the injustice.

We also must defend the human rights of the ethnic Armenians who are now political prisoners or prisoners of war in Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as the cultural heritage of Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh. I look forward to hearing very expert testimony on that today.

Because today is the anniversary of the fall of Nagorno-Karabakh, we will focus on the government of Azerbaijan’s grave human rights abuses against ethnic Armenians.

But we remember that the ethnic Azerbaijanis are also suffering under the dictatorship of Ilham Aliyev. According to the Union for the Freedom for Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan, there are 300 known ethnic Azerbaijani political prisoners in Azerbaijan.

In the past year I have advocated particularly for the release of Gubad Ibadoglu, an eminent international economist who returned to Azerbaijan last summer to visit his mother. He was jailed for his work promoting human rights and freedom for Azerbaijan, and has spent the last 14 months in prison or house arrest, in conditions which are life threatening.

In 2015 I had a personal meeting with President Ilham Aliyev. This was in Baku, and we talked for almost an hour – I did press him on human rights, and it was a civil conversation. But obviously, he did *not* change his ways.

I want to *continue to appeal* to President Aliyev for a dramatic change – a change for Azerbaijanis, who live under what is really one of the most repressive governments in the world, which makes almost every “worst of the worst” list. And a change for ethnic Armenians – who should be released from prison and given dramatic effective gestures of reconciliation, rather than warmongering talk about “Western Azerbaijan” and demands on the territory of the Republic of Armenia.

Regarding our own government, I can only deplore that the Biden administration did not object to the government of Azerbaijan's bid to host the [COP29](#), a major international summit to address climate change. This will open in Baku on November 11. Heads of state and large delegations from around the world will be in Baku. Of course the government of Azerbaijan is using this as a golden opportunity to showcase itself – absurdly, the government that committed genocide in 2023 is now [posing](#) as the peacemaker of 2024: the government is calling on all countries in conflict to observe *a military truce* for the duration of the COP29 conference. How touching. How about a truce in the government's assault on the people who live within its own borders – and a release of political prisoners and prisoners of war?

I'd like to announce right now that I am preparing to introduce, in the run-up to the COP29 conference, an Azerbaijan Democracy Act, a bill that will put U.S. policy sharply on the side of freedom, human rights and rule of law in Azerbaijan.