



**Azerbaijan's War Against Nagorno-Karabakh
The 44-Day War, Blockade & Ethnic Cleansing**

September 19, 2024

**Center for Truth & Justice Testimony
The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

Good Morning. Chairman Smith, Chairman McGovern, and members of the Commission thank you for allowing me to present testimony today on human rights violations and atrocities committed by the government of Azerbaijan against ethnic Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh.

My name is Sharmagh Mardi. I received my Law Degree from the American University of Armenia. I am a Supervising Lawyer with the Center for Truth & Justice, known as CFTJ. The Center for Truth and Justice is an international human rights organization documenting atrocity crimes for education, to bring about change, and to pursue accountability.

CFTJ's mission is to amplify the voices of victims of human rights violations, including discrimination, ethnic cleansing, displacement, war crimes, mass atrocities, and genocide.

My role at CFTJ involves collecting first-hand testimonial evidence from the victims of armed conflicts. Over the past four years, CFT has worked with and collected over 530 testimonies from victims of atrocities and repatriated POWS who have shared their harrowing experiences as victims of Azerbaijan's aggression.

On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan initiated an unprovoked, full-fledged military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh with intense bombardment, the use of drones, sensors, and long-range artillery to isolate and dismantle Armenian positions followed by ground troops consisting of approximately 2,580 Syrian extremist mercenaries recruited by Turkey to fight on behalf of Azerbaijan. Monetary inducements ranged from \$1,500 to \$2,000, and they were promised additional incentives of \$100 for killing an ethnic Armenian civilian and \$200 for killing an ethnic Armenian soldier. They were required to behead their victims and to take photographs of the decapitated heads as proof to claim these bonuses.

The Azerbaijani Armed Forces also employed cluster munitions in the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, Stepanakert, and Hadrut, forming the southern border of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Azerbaijani Armed Forces used incendiary weapons of mass destruction containing chemical elements against the forest areas of Nagorno-Karabakh, where ethnic Armenians sought refuge following indiscriminate shelling of residential areas by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces. As a consequence, civilians sustained wounds and injuries inflicted by the incendiary ammunition used by the Azerbaijani side.

Additionally, eyewitness testimonies reported by CFTJ corroborated the usage of incendiary weapons. Numerous Armenians, both civilians and combatants, testified to experiencing fourth or even fifth-degree thermal burns, paralysis, and having particles of white phosphorus remain in their bodies even after undergoing numerous surgeries. Furthermore, due to feelings of powerlessness or helplessness, some survivors have expressed a desire to die or commit suicide, particularly those who have suffered severe burns and fear the painful treatment they must endure daily.

After the indiscriminate shelling of residential areas in Nagorno-Karabakh by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces, a significant number of civilians were forced to flee and seek refuge.

This conflict lasted 44 days and resulted in the tragic loss of 5,000 Armenian lives. Amnesty International reported, “The frequent attacks on towns and villages in Nagorno-Karabakh could have resulted in a larger number of civilian casualties had many civilians not left the region or taken shelter in basements.”

Over 160 Armenian civilians and soldiers were arbitrarily detained.

Azerbaijani soldiers filmed and shared videos of the torture, murder, mutilation, and beheading of captured Armenian soldiers and civilians on TikTok and Telegram social media channels. CFTJ cataloged these open-source digital recordings and they are readily available. The CFTJ is happy to make this catalog available for the Members of this Commission and the United States Congress.

On November 9, 2020, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia signed a ceasefire agreement known as the “Trilateral Statement”. Both Azerbaijan and Russia repeatedly violated this signed agreement.

During the war, approximately 30,000 ethnic Armenians escaped from Hadrut, Shushi, and Kalbajar. Once these territories were overtaken and occupied by the Azerbaijan Armed Forces, the 30,000 Armenians could no longer return to their homes and their communities due to fear of death and danger, apprehensive of living under Azerbaijani authoritarian rule. And very regrettably the United States and the European Union were silent.

Many escaped to Armenia to find refuge, and some relocated to Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Following the ceasefire agreement, numerous videos surfaced on TikTok and Telegram social media channels depicting Armenian PoWs and civilians being subjected to mistreatment, humiliation, torture, mutilation, death, and decapitation. These videos underscore the violence that was launched against the Armenians and their explicit intent to either kill or forcibly remove all Armenians from their indigenous lands.

In one such instance on October 14, 2020, two unarmed Armenians were captured on video in Hadrut, one of whom is elderly, with their hands bound behind their backs and wrapped in the flags of the Republic of Armenia and Artsakh respectively. Following a command, they were mercilessly shot multiple times by the Azerbaijani soldiers. On the video, before the fatal shots, an order in Azerbaijani can be heard from someone directing the soldiers to “aim at their heads.” This incident has been extensively investigated by BBC and Bellingcat.

In January 2021, President Aliyev again celebrated Azerbaijan’s violence and killing of Armenians, emphasizing the success of military action where other diplomatic strategies failed, further encouraging aggressive actions:

“We brought them back, chased the enemy away, crushed the enemy (ethnic Armenians), threw them out of our lands, took back Shusha and liberated it.”

During and following the 2020 Ceasefire Agreement, thousands of Armenians, including civilians ranging from 9 to 84 years old, were murdered by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces. Numerous cases involved ethnic Armenian civilian residents of Nagorno-Karabakh being killed in their homes or villages during the unlawful military aggression of Azerbaijani forces using a variety of methods including drone strikes, sniper fire, close-range gunfire, decapitation, and traumatic brain injuries resulting from beatings, among others. A considerable number of these victims were elderly and disabled individuals who were unable to evacuate before Azerbaijani forces seized control of their towns.

According to the testimonial evidence collected by CFTJ, in January 2021, the body of a disabled Armenian woman was discovered by her brother in Karin Tak village, Nagorno-Karabakh. Her body exhibited signs of severe torture, with her nose flattened, clothes torn, and the left side of her body mutilated, including injuries to her leg, hand, and ear. Her brother came across a distressing video in Azerbaijani Telegram channels depicting her mutilation, indicating the presence of two or three individuals in their yard. Further examination at the morgue revealed additional injuries, including a severed tongue, as reported by the

attending doctor to the witness. The witness also confirmed the presence of a slit throat upon inspecting the body. The date of death was determined to be November 4, 2020.

Many of the most egregious crimes are flaunted by Azerbaijani soldiers themselves, who film and disseminate videos of summary executions on platforms like TikTok and Telegram. Furthermore, members of the Azerbaijani military created stickers, memes, and emojis mocking Armenians they have killed, which are then circulated to the victims' families via social media. A mother of an Armenian PoW, interviewed by CFTJ, shared her distressing account. Her last contact with her son was on October 11, 2020. On December 19, 2020, she came across videos on social media and immediately recognized her son, who was being held captive by Azerbaijan.

Her son's body was discovered in December 2020, showing signs of torture and murder. However, it was not until April 2021 that a witness positively identified him by his tattoo. He had been subjected to brutal violence, including beheading and severe burning, that rendered him unrecognizable. Additionally, he bore two bullet wounds on his legs, 2-3 stab wounds on his chest, and had skin on his right arm cut off. A forensic examination revealed missing internal organs and broken ribs.

The Azerbaijani unlawful military aggression against ethnic Armenians has transcended attacks on individuals, extending to the destruction of objects emblematic of Armenian identity, including cultural heritage sites. Since Azerbaijan unlawfully occupied Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, a multitude of sites in Nagorno-Karabakh, including cemeteries, churches, and the ruins of the ancient city of Tigranakert, have faced ongoing threats, damage, or outright destruction by Azerbaijani military actions, both during and after the hostilities.

For example, the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral in Shushi was deliberately bombed twice on October 8, 2020, by Azerbaijani armed forces. Recent images have depicted Azerbaijan's reconstruction efforts which have removed the dome that depicts its Armenian Orthodox character, including the removal of the Christian cross from the highest dome of the church. As documented by Monument Watch monitoring efforts in Hadrut, satellite imagery captured between May and June 2021 revealed the near-complete destruction of the Armenian Genocide Memorial Complex in Azokh village, with the memorial itself entirely obliterated.

Blockade & Ethnic Cleansing

For nearly ten months, ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh endured a blockade that cut them off from the rest of the world, including the Republic of Armenia. On December 12, 2022, state-sponsored individuals from Azerbaijan, posing as "eco-activists" in civilian clothing, set up tents and closed the Lachin Corridor. This corridor was a vital economic, social, and humanitarian link, providing access to necessary resources, support, and security. On April 23, 2023, armed Azerbaijani soldiers replaced the "eco-activists" and established an illegal

checkpoint at the corridor. The sustained blockade also violated a February 2023 order by the International Court of Justice requiring “unimpeded movement . . . along the Lachin Corridor.”^[1]

[1] Order of Feb. 22, 2023, *Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Armenia v. Azerbaijan)*, INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE, at ¶ 67, available at <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/180/180-20230222-ORD-01-00-EN.pdf> (requiring Azerbaijan to “ensure unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles and cargo along the Lachin Corridor in both directions”).

Over 120,000 Armenians residing in Nagorno-Karabakh, which included 30,000 children, were deprived of necessities such as food, medicine, gas, electricity, and internet access. Eyewitness testimonial evidence collected by CFTJ reveals that, as a result of the blockade, families went without food, children without education, and the sick without medicine. Additionally, Azerbaijan repeatedly cut off water, electricity, gas, and internet access, making it impossible for Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh to access these essential services. According to testimonial evidence collected by CFTJ during the blockade in Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh were observed standing in long queues for several hours to obtain limited provisions, such as 5 eggs. On August 15, 2023, the first death due to malnutrition was reported. Additionally, it was observed that residents of Nagorno-Karabakh experienced daily episodes of fainting due to malnutrition. This was not merely a physical blockade but a systematic and deliberate strategy to force the Armenian population into submission and drive them out of their ancestral lands.

On September 19, 2023, the Azerbaijan Armed Forces launched a cowardly military assault on Nagorno-Karabakh, targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure, coupled with the circulation of open-source videos and photos along with threats of rape and murder, to advance psychological propaganda.

The Armenian population had no choice but to flee their homes, lands and personal property and avoid imminent death by escaping to Armenia. Azerbaijani social media channels openly issued threats of abuse against civilians, ranging from bounties placed on missing children to the dissemination of images and reports of massacres targeting residents who refused to evacuate their homes, resulting in frantic civilian efforts to flee before the arrival of Azerbaijani military forces. An Azerbaijani Telegram channel with over 11,000 followers was circulating photos of missing Armenians, who disappeared due to Azerbaijan's unlawful military actions, along with threats of rape and murder.

For example, above a photograph of children it was written, “Children of whores should clean toilets and work hard in mines for pennies.” And under the same photograph, it was stated, “They are lost. Whoever finds them, rape them, cut them into pieces, and feed them to dogs as dinner”. Within days, over 120,000 Armenians crossed into Armenia, on their own means, coerced by destruction, torture, rape, and killings to abandon their homes and lands, leaving behind all of their possessions and their loved ones buried in Armenian cemeteries in Nagorno-Karabakh. Testimonial evidence collected by CFTJ also reveals that the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh was subjected to terror, particularly before their forced

displacement and during the assault on the Hakari Bridge. A witness from Nagorno-Karabakh's communications office reported that on September 20, 2023, as the conflict escalated, they were working from a basement when an alarming SMS began circulating. The message said, "We will soon arrive," from the "Grey Wolves."

President Aliyev presented the following ultimatum to ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh following months of starvation, aggression, and persecution:

"Armenians living in Karabakh must either take up Azerbaijani citizenship or seek another place of residence," as stated during his interview in April 2023 with the Az TV channel.

Testimonial evidence collected by CFTJ also reveals that the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh was subjected to terror, particularly before their forced displacement and during the assault on the Hakari Bridge. A witness recounted the tragic experience of her mother, who, despite having no prior health issues, passed away as they approached the Azerbaijani checkpoint due to stress and fear.

The forced deportations of the 120,000 Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh into the Republic of Armenia created a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. By October 1, 2023, the forcible deportation and ethnic cleansing of the Armenian population to Armenia was complete. Many families reported being separated from relatives in the chaos of departure, leaving behind most of their belongings, including their properties, homes, and lands. In some instances, families dug up their buried relatives and took their bodies with them knowing full well that Azerbaijan would destroy their cemeteries, a sacred place for Armenians.

During the unlawful military aggression of the Azerbaijan Armed Forces, several prominent leaders and former leaders of the autonomous government of Nagorno-Karabakh, the government of Artsakh, as well as civilian, law enforcement, and military officials, were arbitrarily detained and charged with various trumped-up terrorism offenses. They are currently held as hostages in prison in Azerbaijan.

CFTJ has collected extensive testimonial evidence on the treatment of POWs in the prisons of Azerbaijan. The extent of physical and psychological torture carried out by the commanders and prison guards shows a systemic pattern of targeting Armenians due to their ethnicity. The fate of these Armenian leaders in the prisons of Azerbaijan is unknown; however, in reviewing how Armenians have been treated in Azerbaijani prisons, there is grave concern that they are similarly being denied their due process rights and are being tortured, mistreated, and psychologically harmed.

This Committee's hearing and recognition of the role CFTJ has played in giving a voice to victims sends a profound statement around the world and offers hope to those who have suffered horrific acts of violence, torture, and ethnic cleansing. The US Congress and Biden – Harris Admin must work to support the efforts of organizations such as CFTJ and we hope the U.S. and its allies around the world unite and hold Azerbaijan to the same standards and punishments as we have to other authoritative regimes including the Putin regime.

In the room today, there are several victims of Azerbaijani aggression and I would like to recognize them.

1) Marina Simonyan (DOB: 1/1/1991) Marina is a lawyer who worked at the Office of the Human Rights Defender of Nagorno-Karabakh and an adjunct professor at the Artsakh State University. She has documented testimonies and evidence of war crimes since the 2020 war. She was one of the last residents to flee Nagorno-Karabakh, ensuring that no one was left behind during the forcible deportation in September of 2023. She was an eyewitness to aggressions and atrocities from the 2020 war through September 2023

2) Hrant Hovhannisyan (DOB: 2/10/1963) Father Hovhannisyan was the Abbot of Dadivank Monastery, an Armenian Apostolic monastery built between the 9th and 13th centuries and is one of the main monastic complexes of medieval Armenia. It is one of scores of Christian sites captured by Azerbaijan during the 2020 war. Azerbaijan's Cultural Ministry announced the creation of a committee to take steps to "remove the fictitious traces written by Armenians" in the captured areas. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said it is "deeply concerned by Azerbaijan's plans to remove Armenian Apostolic inscriptions from churches. We urge the government to preserve and protect places of worship and other religious and cultural sites." To protect the monastery's relics from destruction, Father Hovhannes had them transported to Armenia. During the 44-Day War, the clergymen of the monastery were in complete isolation, surrounded by Azerbaijani troops. Father Hovhnaess stayed at the monastery to protect it. During last year's military attack by Azerbaijan, he was targeted in his home. A young boy who lived in his home died while others were injured. He, too, had to escape Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia.

3) Lala Abgaryan (DOB: 12/27/1981) Lala's sister, Gayane Abgaryan was filmed after she was captured, tortured, and mutilated by the Azerbaijani Yashma brigade in September of 2023, when Azerbaijani forces attacked and infiltrated into Armenia. They filmed the entire violent incident and placed it on social media for five consecutive days. The video shows Gayane's body, stripped naked, eyes gouged and replaced with stones, legs cut off, ears cut off, and her severed finger shoved in her mouth while an Azerbaijani soldier was kicking her mutilated body. The perpetrators wrote the name of their brigade on her body. The State Department, Human Rights Watch, and many others have condemned this atrocity.

4) Goharine Hovoyan (DOB: 4/19/1989) Goharine and her family came under bombardment in September of 2023. Her 16-year-old son and a neighbor died when a bomb fell in their garden. Her 13-year-old, Father Hovhaness (see above), and Goharine were all wounded. They escaped to Armenia, where they live as refugees.

Thank you again for allowing me to present testimony today and ensure there is justice for Indigenous Armenians and accountability for Azerbaijan's actions.