



Refugees from the Nagorno-Karabakh region in Azerbaijan ride in a truck upon their arrival at the border village of Kornidzor, Armenia, Sept. 27, 2023. Tens of thousands of ethnic Armenians, most of them Christian, are fleeing the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh following a defeat by surrounding Azerbaijan forces, with Armenia's president saying that "ethnic cleansing" is taking place. (OSV News photo/Irakli Gedenidze, Reuters)

Gina Christian

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More than 66,000 people -- over half of the total population of 120,000 -- have fled Nagorno-Karabakh as of Sept. 27, abandoning the historic Armenian enclave (known in Armenian by its ancient name, Artsakh) located in southwestern Azerbaijan and internationally recognized as part of that nation.

"History is repeating itself," Bishop Mikael A. Mouradian of the California-based Armenian Catholic Eparchy of Our Lady of Nareg told OSV News. He said the exodus of ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh marks "very sad and dark days for Armenians."

The outflow comes after a Sept. 20 ceasefire following a Sept. 19 offensive launched by Azerbaijan troops against Nagorno-Karabakh.

As part of the Russian-brokered ceasefire, Nagorno-Karabakh forces acceded to Azerbaijan's demands for complete disarmament.

The attacks, which Azerbaijani forces called an "anti-terror" operation, killed at least 32 people, including seven civilians, and wounded another 200. Karabakh officials said they recovered an additional 100 bodies, including those of two children and an elderly couple, in the rubble.

Those casualties were compounded by a Sept. 25 explosion at a fuel station near the enclave's capital, Stepanakert, as residents prepared to drive to Armenia. The blast killed at least 68 and injured 290, while over 100 are still missing, according to the enclave's authorities.

The rapid exodus has shown that few of the enclave's residents have confidence in Azerbaijan's announcement that it planned to "reintegrate" the enclave's residents into Azerbaijani society.

Mouradian told OSV News that he has received reports of "persecution and torture of civilians."

He pointed to "a very disturbing video" had received Sept. 27 showing an Azeri soldier "literally slaughtering like a butcher an old and defenseless Armenian man."

In recent interviews with OSV News and other media, Mouradian has repeatedly stressed that Azerbaijan intends to conduct "ethnic cleansing" among the enclave's residents.

Mouradian also expressed concerns over a report in the Armenian newspaper Hraparak that Azerbaijani authorities had given Nagorno-Karabakh representatives a list of people to be handed over -- among them, former leaders of the enclave, as well as state and military figures.

On Sept. 27, Azerbaijan announced it had arrested Nagorno-Karabakh's former state minister, Ruben Vardanyan, as he attempted to cross into Armenia.

The enclave's government announced it will dissolve itself.

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The attacks and ceasefire were preceded by a months-long blockade of critical supplies to the enclave, resulting in what U.S. Agency for International Development chief Samantha Power called "severe malnutrition" among residents.

Since December 2022, the three-mile corridor -- the only road leading from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh -- had been closed by Azerbaijan, depriving the enclave's residents of food, baby formula, oil, medication, hygienic products and fuel.

Power and the U.S. State Department's acting assistant secretary, Yuri Kim, met with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in Yerevan Sept. 25, assuring that nation of U.S. support.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev Sept. 26, urging "no further hostilities ... unconditional protections and freedom of movement for civilians (and) ... unhindered humanitarian access to Nagorno Karabakh," said State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller at a press briefing.

Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., a Catholic lawmaker who authored the Azerbaijan Democracy Act in 2015, issued a Sept. 25 statement announcing legislation to "avert further atrocities and prevent ethnic cleansing by Azerbaijani forces in Nagorno-

Karabakh."

The Preventing Ethnic Cleansing and Atrocities in Nagorno-Karabakh Act of 2023 (HR 5686) calls for U.S. diplomatic monitoring of the region, humanitarian aid, 24-hour video monitoring of Armenian cultural sites, foreign military aid to Armenia while ending such aid to Azerbaijan, and new sanctions on those responsible for the Lachin Corridor blockade.

Testifying at a Sept. 6 emergency hearing chaired by Smith, Luis Moreno-Ocampo, who served as the first chief prosecutor for the International Criminal Court from 2003-2012, stated the blockade had violated Article II(c) of the 1948 Genocide Convention -- to which the U.S. is a signatory -- by "creating conditions to destroy people."

Mouradian told OSV News Sept. 27 that Azerbaijan's actions evoked the 1915-1916 Armenian Genocide, when up to 1.2 million Armenians were slaughtered and starved under the Ottoman Empire. The atrocities were the basis for lawyer Raphael Lemkin's development of the term "genocide."

Both Christian Armenians and Turkic Azeris lived for centuries in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which became part of the Russian empire during the 19th century. After World War I, the region became an autonomous part of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan.

Nagorno-Karabakh declared itself independent in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union, and quickly became the focus of a 1992-1994 struggle between Armenia and Azerbaijan for control of the region, with some 30,000 killed and more than one million displaced. Russia brokered a 1994 ceasefire, and in a 2017 referendum, voters approved a new constitution and a change in name to the Republic of Artsakh (although "Nagorno Karabakh Republic" also remains an official name).

A second war broke out in 2020 when Azerbaijan launched an offensive to reclaim territory, with 3,000 of Azerbaijani and 4,000 Armenian soldiers killed. Russian peacekeepers were stationed to monitor a renewed ceasefire and to guard the Lachin Corridor, but fighting erupted again in 2022.

The current crisis, in the context of the historical cycle of violence, "is much more painful when the so-called superpowers and democratic governments are doing nothing," said Mouradian. "Yes, they are deploring the situation, but concretely, no one is helping on the ground. I don't know what to say."