

Remarks by
The Honorable Narine Aghabalyan
Minister of Youth and Culture, Republic of Nagorno Karabakh

Delivered at the
Capitol Hill Celebration of the
25th Anniversary of the Karabakh Freedom Movement
Hosted by the Congressional Armenian Caucus

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Washington, DC

Reverend Fathers,

Your Excellency Ambassador Markarian,

Honorable Members of Congress,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank the Congressional Caucus on Armenian Issues for this initiative, which once again shows Congress' interest in the peaceful settlement of the Azerbaijani-Karabakh conflict, in preserving peace, and in fostering democratic progress in the South Caucasus.

I would also like to thank all those who are participating in this event, in particular the Armenian Embassy, the Armenian National Committee of America, the Armenian Assembly of America, NKR office and, of course, all of you for being here.

Recently, Armenians, not only in my homeland but also in many countries around the world, including the United States, are celebrating the 25th anniversary of two historic events, which have played a crucial role for the people of Artsakh: the Karabakh movement and the Sumgait massacres. The Karabakh movement symbolizes the struggle of the Armenians of Artsakh for their rights and freedoms.

I was lucky not only to witness these historical events, but also to be a direct participant. The Karabakh movement started at the end of 1980's. It was the period of Gorbachev's Perestroika, a new approach was initiated in the Soviet Union. It gave people a hope for democratic change and inspired them to speak out about problems that had existed in the Soviet Union for decades, but were subjected to a "symbolic silence" under the Communist regime. The Karabakh issue was one of those problems, and, I am proud to say, we were the first to break the silence.

When the Karabakh movement started I was a student at the Educational Institute in Stepanakert. On February 13, 1988 young students decided to organize a rally and publicly declare that we wouldn't tolerate Azerbaijani oppression any longer and that we wanted to decide the fate of our historic motherland ourselves. When the Institute leadership learned of our intentions, they locked the doors to prevent us from going into the streets. We had no other option but to jump – jump out of the second story windows to the street below. In fact, with that jump we not only broke through the physical barrier before us, but through a barrier deep within us. It was a moment of civic awareness, of rebirth, the beginning of the people's battle against dictatorship and injustice.

Once on the street, we moved to the city's central square. The whole population of Karabakh joined our movement. The people understood that they were the real power and they were the decision makers. It was a courageous step to take living under the control of Soviet regime. It was for the first time in the Soviet Union that people went to the public square to raise their voice and stand up for their rights.

The Parliamentarians of the time supported the will of people of Karabakh. On February 20th, the Regional Council of the People's Deputies in Karabakh decided to request that the Soviet authorities transfer the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) to Armenia. Our forefathers had dreamt, and also worked, for this since 1921 when Karabakh had been arbitrarily and forcibly placed under Azerbaijani administration by decision of the Caucasian Bureau of the Communist Party.

We were naive enough to believe that the central government in Moscow would hear our voice and make the right and moral decision. We believed that there was nothing anti-constitutional in our request, since the reforms that were being carried out in the USSR in 1980s gave us hope that justice would triumph.

However, just a few days later, Sumgait began.. With the silent agreement of the authorities and the complete inaction of the law enforcement agencies, an Azerbaijani massacre of the Armenian population of the city was organized. Innocent people were being murdered, raped and maimed simply for being Armenian. That was the Azerbaijani response to our peaceful protests.

The events in Sumgait became the "litmus-test" for the totalitarian Soviet regime, which demonstrated its inability for true reform. The events which started 25 years ago on this tiny spot on the world map – in Nagorno Karabakh – would have a significant impact not only on this region but also on the collapse of the Soviet Union and the future geopolitical developments worldwide.

We faced a threat of physical annihilation and we had to take measures for self-defense in the face of Azerbaijani military aggression.

The imposed war cost thousands of lives, almost completely destroyed Karabakh's economy, infrastructure, housing, cultural and civic centers and caused the forced displacement of many of our people.

For four years we lived in dark, wet basements, without light and gas, without any possibility to find clean drinking water. Our homes were being shelled every minute, our children could not go to school. Many of our children learned to count by counting the shells of fired bullets. They also learned to distinguish the type weapons used against us, by the sounds they made.

I am sure that many of you know the story well, so I won't go into greater detail about the past. Let me speak about the current situation.

A quarter of a century has passed and today the Nagorno Karabakh Republic (Artsakh) is a free, sovereign and democratic state. In the last 25 years significant progress has been made to rebuild that which was destroyed by war, to meet the basic needs of our people to thrive and build a democratic state.

Internationally unrecognized and therefore largely deprived of much-needed support, we have chosen the path of democracy and built a state where human rights and civil rights are considered our highest of values. Artsakh's commitment to democratic principles have been affirmed by U.S. legislators and all the international observers who have, in recent years, served as observers at Artsakh's presidential, parliamentary and municipal elections.

We have achieved all this while being under constant military threat by Azerbaijan. There are shootings on the Azerbaijani-Karabakh border every day which frequently cause the death of our 18-20 years old youth. This is evidence of how fragile the peace in our region remains.

Of course, the role of the OSCE Minsk Group, in which the United States serves as a Co-Chair, is crucial in maintaining peace in the conflict zone. On behalf of the authorities and people of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic, I want to thank the U.S. government for its mediation efforts within the OSCE Minsk group.

Unfortunately, I believe that what is happening in Azerbaijan today doesn't leave space for much optimism that the mediators will be able to secure tangible results in the near future.

Both in Artsakh and Azerbaijan a new generation is growing, offering the opportunity to sow the seeds of tolerance which will help us reach a stable and long-lasting peace. But, sadly, that's not happening, for only one reason: With Azerbaijan threatening war every day, people on both sides of the border have to prepare for that war.

The President of Azerbaijan declares that all Armenians of the world are the number one enemy of Azerbaijan. He glorifies and makes a national hero of a man who beheaded a sleeping Armenian lieutenant with an axe, and presents him as a role model to the coming generations. He pursues and organizes persecution of a national writer at a state level only because he dared to present his point of view about the conflict between Azerbaijan and Karabakh in his novel... This list could go on, and these are not events of the past, they happen every day and cast doubt not only on Azerbaijan's willingness to solve the problem in a peaceful way, but also on their promises to ensure the future security of the people of Nagorno Karabakh.

The first step in the peaceful settlement of any conflict is civic dialogue. In this regard, I would like to draw the attention of this respected audience and especially Members of Congress to the fact that Azerbaijan is not ready for civic dialogue and at the same time tries to prevent or interfere with Artsakh's communication with the world.

For many years Azerbaijan has been conducting an isolation policy towards the Nagorno Karabakh Republic that absolutely defies common sense. Everyone who visits Artsakh is included in Azerbaijan's "black list," even if they visit Artsakh with the most peaceful of missions or for simple tourism. Members of parliaments of various countries, political and public figures, who have visited Karabakh as elections observers, various journalists who came to report the events taking place in Artsakh, sculptors, singers, painters and others have been included in Azerbaijan's "black list." Even astronauts Charles Duke and Claude Nicollier, who took part in the conference titled 'Man and Universe' dedicated to Neil Armstrong, in Stepanakert, were included in Azerbaijan's persona non grata list. It turns out that even people who have travelled to the moon have to ask Azerbaijan's permission to visit Karabakh. If this policy continues, I suppose, the number of the people registered in Azerbaijan's black list will exceed that of the population of their country because the number of the visitors to Artsakh increases annually by at least 40-50 percent. In fact, Azerbaijan's absurd behaviour in seeking to prevent Artsakh from participating in international exhibitions creates an additional interest in Artsakh, which also increases the number of visitors to Artsakh.

Azerbaijan's policy of isolating Artsakh from the world may be explained by the fact that Baku, despite its claims, is not interested in making the international community aware of what really happens in Artsakh. Because the reality completely differs from the 'truth' that it is trying to present to the world.

Of course, we welcome the efforts, made by all those institutions and public figures who try to temper Azerbaijan, however it's obvious that Azerbaijan succeeds in escalating the tension in the region and endangering the process of the peaceful settlement of Karabakh conflict. In such a situation, naturally, we must note that 25 years is enough for us to have learned the lessons from the past, and that today, more than ever before, Artsakh is ready to defend its rights.

The Nagorno Karabakh Republic is a legal state, which was created through the free expression of the democratic will of the people of Karabakh, and it is, in fact, the non-recognition of this state that contradicts international laws and norms. Our unrecognized status prevents the full realization of the rights of the people who live in Artsakh. It is appropriate to cite the words of the third President of the United States, an outstanding public figure, Thomas Jefferson: 'Everything is changeable in the world except the natural rights of people.'

In this regard, I would like to thank the representatives of the U.S. legislature who have been defending the rights of the Karabakh all these years, have worked for the recognition of the Republic of Artsakh, and assisted in the development of democracy in Artsakh. On behalf of NKR authorities, I would like to thank and convey the Artsakh people's warm greetings and best wishes to the American legislators who congratulated the Artsakh Republic President and people on the 25th anniversary of the Artsakh movement. We would be glad to see you in Artsakh, because the best way to know the reality about Artsakh is to visit. My country welcomes everyone who comes with kind intentions to see and learn more about our Republic.

The French artists who have recently given concerts in Artsakh confessed that 'in Artsakh you can find such frankness and depth as nowhere else'.

In the recent years we hear more and more frequently about these kinds of praise from international visitors. They come to see the historical monuments of Artsakh, which number in the thousands, to learn about our culture, rest in our beautiful nature, enjoy the clear air, and communicate with the people of Artsakh, who have always been known for their hospitality.

Of course the role of Armenia and Armenian Diaspora including the Armenian Diaspora in the United States is immense in the establishment and development of Artsakh. A meaningful part of the problems we face in Artsakh over the last several years has been solved due to the annual aid from the American Congress. By the way the United States is the only country, which provides direct aid to Artsakh.

This aid solves problems of vital importance and helps our people to overcome the consequences of Azerbaijan's war. So in conclusion, once again I would like to thank the Congress and people of America and express hope that the United States will remain committed to its political mission and continue its efforts in supporting peace in Artsakh and the South Caucasian region, and stand for basic fairness in recognizing the inalienable right of people of Artsakh to self determination.

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