

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Safeguarding the People of Nagorno-Karabakh

June 21, 2023 - 2:00 p.m.
2360 Rayburn House Office Building

STATEMENT SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Submitted by:

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Member of Congress

Thank you to co-Chairs Rep. Smith and Rep. McGovern for convening this important Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing, and to the witnesses for sharing their expertise and insights with us. In the South Caucasus today, we face a crisis of human rights, democracy, and the international rules-based order. The democratic and peaceful people of Artsakh face the real threat of ethnic cleansing and genocide at the hands of an autocratic Azerbaijani regime. Azerbaijani President Aliyev continues to use force, threats, and terror in his plans to expel or annihilate the citizens of Artsakh and take control of the Armenian territories, without consequences. For nearly seven months, the people of Artsakh have lived under an illegal blockade of the Lachin Corridor by Azerbaijan, in violation of international law and the 2020 trilateral ceasefire statement. The effect has been devastating to the population, rendering 120,000 individuals without access to food, water, medical supplies and services, consistent gas and electricity, and essential rights guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, such as freedom of movement.

Despite repeated calls by the international community and an International Court of Justice ruling that ordered Azerbaijan to immediately lift its blockade, Aliyev has only been emboldened to tighten the noose further around Artsakh. I am extremely concerned by reports that since June 15, Baku has halted all humanitarian access through the Lachin Corridor, even prohibiting the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Russian peacekeepers from delivering lifesaving humanitarian aid and transporting patients in need of urgent medical attention. Sadly, I have yet to see any forceful U.S. condemnation of the decision to shut out the ICRC and cut off Artsakh completely from the world. Without strong measures to force Aliyev to comply with international law, countless innocent ethnic Armenian civilians will lose their lives due to lack of food, water, and access to medical treatment. For months I have made my view clear that the United States must intervene to protect innocent civilians, including by cutting off assistance to Azerbaijan and implementing sanctions to compel a change in behavior. We must act urgently and decisively, before it is too late.

Alongside Aliyev's aggressive actions, his increasingly hateful and threatening rhetoric also forecasts his intentions and should be raising alarms around the world. In public remarks on May 28,ⁱ Aliyev threatened the democratically elected leaders of Artsakh, stating, "Either they will bend their necks and come themselves or things will develop differently now...everyone knows perfectly well that we have all the opportunities to carry out any operation in that [Nagorno Karabakh] region today." Furthermore, in a clear and blatant threat which cannot be enabled nor tolerated by the United States, Aliyev demanded Armenians of Artsakh to become "loyal and normal citizen[s] of Azerbaijan," the resignation of Artsakh's elected leadership, and the dissolution of Artsakh's institutions, which have been functioning democratically for 30 years. He continued his threats of unprovoked military action against Armenia, stating, "Let them know that we can see Armenian villages from here. We can see those villages, so they shouldn't forget about that."

Sickeningly, Aliyev feels he has the backing of the United States, Russia, and the international community for his actions. He stated in the same speech that "international organizations have completely agreed with our position of late."

Against this alarming backdrop, the State Department and USAID have issued numerous positive statements and made upbeat comments about ongoing peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan. I strongly believe that another all-out war would be devastating for civilians in the region and that the people of the South Caucasus deserve peace—a just and lasting peace. We cannot sacrifice civilians, human rights, democratic values, and a commitment to international law in favor of a solution that abrogates the right of self-determination. An agreement forged through appeasement of an aggressive autocrat will be neither a just peace nor a lasting one. And importantly, for peace talks to succeed, all relevant parties must have a seat at the table, on equal footing.

I am deeply concerned by revelations that Artsakh has been used as a bargaining chip in the peace talks, without any representation. This contravenes U.S. values and international law. Article I of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states, "All peoples have the right of self-determination." The Republic of Artsakh declared its independence with near-unanimous consent in a referendum on December 10, 1991, consistent with their rights under the Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States (1970) in accordance with the UN Charter, following Azerbaijan's deprivation of the fundamental rights of the region's Armenian population and use of force. Officials of the democratically elected government of Artsakh continue to voice their desire to engage in peace talks with Azerbaijan, as an equal partner through an internationally recognized format, and in the presence of strong international guarantees for security, the right to self-determination, human rights, and the implementation of the parties' obligations.

The security and rights of the 120,000 Armenians living in Artsakh cannot be guaranteed under the authoritarian rule of Ilham Aliyev, who has orchestrated numerous atrocities against this population over the years, including the ethnic cleansing of thousands of Armenians in Shushi and Hadrut during the 2020 conflict, the torture and killing of Armenian prisoners of war, and the destruction of Armenian religious and cultural sites in Artsakh. Armenians in Armenia, Artsakh, and the diaspora have memories of unspeakable horror, and of the murder of people

they knew and loved. It is the right of the people of Artsakh to live free of political, cultural, and economic oppression, and as a protector of democracy, the United States must continue to support and stand with the people of Artsakh to achieve the recognition it deserves among all nations.

To safeguard human rights in Artsakh, the United States must take immediate measures to condemn ceasefire violations by Azerbaijan; call on Azerbaijan to immediately and unconditionally release all Armenian prisoners of war; hold Azerbaijan accountable for the ongoing blockade of the Lachin Corridor, including through sanctions and cutting off aid to Azerbaijan; and ensure the protection and right to self-determination of the people of Artsakh, whose people have spoken with one voice that they will not give up on their right to independence and a peaceful life with dignity.

I thank the witnesses for joining today and for delving into their perspectives on what steps Congress, the Biden Administration, and the international community can take to safeguard the people of Artsakh at this precarious moment.

ⁱ <https://president.az/en/articles/view/60027>