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First evacuees from Nagorno-Karabakh cross into Armenia

Monday 25 September 2023, by [ROTH Andrew](#) (Date first published: 24 September 2023).

Officials plan to evacuate thousands of displaced people from region after Azerbaijani military offensive

The first several hundred refugees from war-torn [Nagorno-Karabakh](#) have crossed into Armenian territory, as a historic evacuation begins that could lead to a mass exodus of ethnic Armenians while Azerbaijan appears on the brink of taking control of the breakaway region.

They are the first civilians to have crossed from Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia in nearly a year, reuniting families after a 10-month blockade and an intensive [Azerbaijani](#) military offensive this week that has left hundreds dead, wounded or missing.

Rima Elizbaryan and her two daughters crossed the border in the early afternoon and were met by her brother, waiting with chocolates and sweets.

It was the first they had seen each other in nearly a year, and the family embraced and cried as they prepared to travel to a relative's home near the city of Goris, close to the border.

"I'm just so happy right now," Elizbaryan said. Her brother said: "I always knew they would come, I knew they would be OK."

Officials in the breakaway Armenian government in Nagorno-Karabakh have said they plan to evacuate thousands of displaced people from the region into [Armenia](#).

Azerbaijan's blockade of the territory has led to desperate shortages of food, fuel and water in the local capital, Stepanakert, and surrounding areas.

The local ethnic Armenian government has called for Azerbaijan to open up the road along the Lachin corridor into Armenia to allow humanitarian aid into and the local population out of Nagorno-Karabakh. Many fear a campaign of ethnic cleansing when Azerbaijani authorities take control.

The local government said evacuees would be accompanied across the border from the disputed region into Armenia by Russian peacekeepers.

"Dear compatriots, we would like to inform you that, accompanied by Russian peacekeepers, the families who were left homeless as a result of the recent military operations and expressed their desire to leave will be transferred to Armenia," a statement read. "The government will issue information about the relocation of other population groups in the near future."

Local officials of the breakaway state, also known as Artsakh, earlier said they planned to evacuate an estimated population of more than 120,000 people to Armenia after Azerbaijan issued plans to

“reintegrate” the territory.

Nagorno-Karabakh is a mountainous region that many Armenians see as their ancestral homeland but is internationally recognised as Azerbaijani territory. It has been governed by a local Armenian government since the early 1990s after years of war. The government is now close to collapse after a ceasefire with Azerbaijan.

Local authorities have made preparations for the evacuation. A Guardian reporter was stopped by police at a new checkpoint near the border of Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh and was told that access to the road was now blocked because of plans for the evacuation.

The Armenian government said it was ready to welcome 120,000 ethnic Armenian compatriots and that it was likely they would leave soon. The first refugees came from the region near Shusha, where Armenian towns and villages were surrounded as Azerbaijani forces surged forward in an offensive this week.

Armenia’s prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, said in a live address on Sunday: “Our government will lovingly welcome our brothers and sisters from Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh still face the danger of ethnic cleansing. Humanitarian supplies have arrived in Nagorno-Karabakh in recent days but this does not change the situation.

“If real living conditions are not created for the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh in their homes, and effective mechanisms of protection against ethnic cleansing, then the likelihood is increasing that the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh will see expulsion from their homeland as the only way out.”

He criticised a Russian-dominated security bloc of which Armenia is a member, saying the Collective Security Treaty Organization had been ineffective in preventing further violence.

It is not yet clear how many people may be evacuated from Nagorno-Karabakh in the coming days, but large hotels in the nearby city of Goris have been fully booked out by the government in order to accommodate the coming influx, hotel employees said.

Russian peacekeepers have said nearly 800 displaced people, many of whom fled small villages and towns attacked by Azerbaijan in its offensive this week, have been living at an airport used by the mission as its base.

Tens of thousands more people are reported to be trapped in Stepanakert, which has received thousands of displaced people who fled to the city after the new round of violence.

The refugees were bussed from Nagorno-Karabakh to a government tent camp near the border. There they were registered, offered housing in local hotels and given access to psychological help. One boy burst into tears as medical personnel spoke to him.

“If you’re going to Goris, please walk to the centre of the tent camp,” an official shouted through a megaphone, leading to a small scrum to board a minibus. Others drove out from Karabakh in private cars, some carrying sacks with all their possessions tied to the roofs.

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