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Karabakh: “It feels like the apocalypse”

Friday 22 September 2023, by [PHIPPS Mike](#) (Date first published: 21 September 2023).

Yesterday [Azerbaijan launched a military offensive](#) against the Armenian enclave of Nagorno- Karabakh, bombing its cities and villages in a so-called “anti-terrorist operation”. Last night, in a televised address, Azerbaijan’s president, Ilham Aliyev, claimed complete victory.

Around 200 people are estimated to have been killed and hundreds more wounded, including old women and children. The [mayor of the city](#) of Marturi, which was shelled, was one of the fatalities. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed support for Azerbaijan’s military aggression.

Last December, [Azerbaijan](#) began a blockade of the disputed region, by closing the Lachin corridor. This created a humanitarian emergency for the ethnic Armenian civilians in the enclave, as food, energy and medical care became increasingly scarce.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch condemned the blockade and the International Court of Justice of the [United Nations](#) ordered Azerbaijan to “ensure unhindered traffic” on the highway connecting Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh. The [European Court of Human Rights](#) also called for free travel. Both rulings were ignored by the Azerbaijan regime.

Azerbaijan’s military intervention had long been threatened. In October 2020, [President Aliyev](#) stated that, “If they do not leave our lands of their own free will, we will chase them away like dogs.”

Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories had been under ethnic Armenian control since the end of a separatist war in 1994, but Azerbaijan regained the territories and parts of Nagorno-Karabakh during fighting in 2020. That ended with an armistice which placed Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh. The enclave is internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan but its population of 120,000 is over [99% Armenian](#).

The current Armenian government of Nikol Pashinyan has distanced itself from the breakaway republic. “We hope that military escalation will not continue, because in the current conditions it is very important to ensure stability and stop combat actions,” Pashinyan said in a televised address to Armenians. He said the [Russian peacekeeping troops](#) took full responsibility for the safety of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Protesters in the Armenian capital took a different view. Thousands gathered in Yerevan’s central Republic Square to express their anger with Pashinyan’s government, as well as what they see as the failures of Russia and the West to protect the lives of ethnic Armenians.

In a comprehensive statement of condemnation, the [Russian Socialist Movement](#) suggested that recent developments made it clear to the Azerbaijan government that “aggressors can get away with anything.” It said: “The obvious beneficiaries of this war are also the regimes of Putin and Erdogan. Russian foreign policy proves that Putin absolutely does not tolerate the manifestation of political subjectivity in countries that, from his point of view, should forever be in the sphere of Russian

influence... A possible constitutional coup in Armenia is Putin's desired outcome of the war unleashed by Aliyev."

[Other analysts](#) agree. One pointed out that some Russian officials and prominent propagandists were "gloating" over the renewed fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh, citing the fact that Dmitry Medvedev, the Chair of Russia's Security Council and Russia's former president, had lashed out at Armenia's President Pashinyan on Telegram for "flirting with Nato" and providing aid to Ukraine. "Guess what fate awaits him," Medvedev said.

The Russian Socialist Movement statement called on Azerbaijan to immediately cease hostilities and open negotiations without any preconditions, and on the international community to immediately impose sanctions against the leadership of Azerbaijan. It pointed out that Azerbaijani border guards, who control the Lachin corridor, several times during the summer abducted Armenian men trying to leave the enclave. "This means that as long as Azerbaijan controls the humanitarian corridors, there is no confidence in the safe evacuation of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh."

Armenians have strong grounds to fear genocide in the region, based on their history. The ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh is a distinct possibility.

Russian-Armenian anti-war activist Arshak Makichyan [tweeted](#) a thread from a woman in Stepanakert: "I was coming from work and a Smerch [meaning Smerch missile] whistled over me. Then the second time, then the third. There were explosions. It was nearby, apartment building was destroyed. That's how I found out [about the beginning of the fighting]... There is no electricity, no food. Stores are not working. People are burning fires, trying to warm water. It feels like the apocalypse... People continue to gather at the airport. There are a lot of young families with children there. They live in tents, there is no food there, no hot meal points... Residents of village of Krasny Bazar who reached Stepanakert told horror stories. They were on foot and their column was shot. And there literally women and children were dying without help... Now the town of Martuni and Martakert are surrounded by Azerbaijanis. They [female residents] are told over the loudspeaker that they are given a day or two and that they must leave everything without their belongings... But how to leave? We have non-walking patients, we have pets. Where are we supposed to go? We've been in a blockade for nine months, we don't even have gasoline, we don't have transportation. And we don't know where to go. Their army is everywhere. They are shooting at our cars."

[Makichyan](#) tweeted: "EU/UN should urgently send peacekeepers to Artsakh to save 120,000 indigenous Armenians and help evacuate them to a safe place. EU should grant Armenian people the right to seek refuge here, as France did in 1915. It's time to save people's lives from Second Armenian Genocide."

Yet the [EU seems reluctant](#) to risk jeopardizing its relationship with the Azerbaijan regime. Two months ago, EU High Representative Josep Borrell announced that the "European Union is deeply concerned about the serious humanitarian situation" in Nagorno-Karabakh, but fell short of recommending any concrete action. A year earlier European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen flew to Baku to sign an agreement doubling the supply of gas from Azerbaijan to the EU.

The British government too has been a major source of foreign investment for Azerbaijan's economy. It was unsurprising therefore that the UK [government's only comment](#) on the bombardment so far was to say that Azerbaijan's use of force was unacceptable but that it was encouraged by the announcement of a ceasefire. Such banalities in the face of a potential human rights catastrophe are shocking.

Mike Phipps book Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow: The Labour Party after Jeremy Corbyn (OR Books, 2022) can be ordered [here](#).

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