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UN urged to push Azerbaijan for humanitarian access to Nagorno-Karabakh

Tuesday 26 September 2023, by [MARTIROSYAN Samson](#), [ROWLEY Thomas](#) (Date first published: 25 September 2023).

As the humanitarian crisis deepens in Nagorno-Karabakh, some question why the UN isn't doing more to help

The United Nations and other international humanitarian organisations should “push harder” for access to the blockaded ethnic Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, experts and sources in the region have told openDemocracy.

Thousands of ethnic Armenian residents of the region are currently fleeing their homes for Armenia itself following [Azerbaijan's military offensive](#) to take control of the region last week. At least 200 people were killed and more than 400 wounded in 24 hours of fierce fighting, [according](#) to Nagorno-Karabakh officials. A Russia-brokered ceasefire, essentially seen as surrender of Karabakh's local defence army, is currently in place.

A source with expertise in human rights in the South Caucasus who wished to remain anonymous told openDemocracy that the “UN is very reluctant to push for access” for humanitarian assistance, but that UN agencies could gain access if they were “bolder”.

Given Azerbaijan's near-total control of Nagorno-Karabakh, the source said, the UN could also send a monitoring mission to observe “how the rights of ethnic Armenians are protected” under Azerbaijani rule.

Larisa Hovhannisyan, CEO of Teach For Armenia – an educational non-profit that has a branch in Nagorno-Karabakh – told openDemocracy that Nagorno-Karabakh residents “have neither the resources nor the bandwidth” to report on the humanitarian crisis, or to collect evidence of alleged violence committed by Azerbaijani forces against civilians.

“Our people there are exhausted and on the brink of starvation and death,” said Hovhannisyan, who said that several of her pupils had been killed during the offensive.

Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognised as Azerbaijani territory, but has been under the control of an unrecognised Armenian government since the 1990s. The mid-September assault marked the culmination of a [nearly ten-month humanitarian blockade](#) of the region by Azerbaijan, which left residents with very limited access to fuel, food and medicine.

“We have repeatedly urged the UN to publicise Azerbaijan's rejections [of requests for access], which has not been done”

— Naira Sultanyan

Only the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), alongside demining organisation the Halo Trust, has had any access to the territory since the blockade started in December. For the first time since June 2023, the ICRC was permitted to [deliver aid](#) on 18 September, the day before Azerbaijan's offensive, and yesterday, via the Lachin Corridor. The corridor is the only road linking Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, and has been closed since the blockade started.

Russian peacekeepers have also sent supplies via the Lachin Corridor. Otherwise, only Azerbaijan itself has been able to [send](#) trucks with food and fuel via the Aghdam-Stepanakert Highway, which connects Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan.

Electricity was cut in Nagorno-Karabakh during Azerbaijan's offensive, although it was [restored](#) on 25 September. Gas remains unavailable as a result of the blockade.

Role of the UN

Alla Harutyunyan is the vice president of Mission Armenia, a charity that provides services to vulnerable groups and a key partner with the UN on humanitarian projects in Armenia. She told openDemocracy that several local and international organisations had been advocating for humanitarian aid since the start of Azerbaijan's blockade, but that the UN – the world's largest multilateral organisation – had been "cautious" when pushing for access and tended to "avoid advocacy" in the region.

"Instead," she said, "they will give support inside Armenia when and if evacuated people from Artsakh [the local name for Nagorno-Karabakh] cross into Armenia. I think they are trying to maintain their neutrality."

But a UN source told openDemocracy on condition of anonymity that the UN had not advocated for greater humanitarian efforts for Nagorno-Karabakh because Azerbaijan, which has been reluctant to grant access to the region since the end of its 44-day war there in 2020, has lobbied within the UN to deter international pressure. "It is not news that the UN has become politicised," they said.

Laurence Broers, an expert on the South Caucasus at the Chatham House think tank in London, added that while the "UN has not played much of a political role in this conflict... UN agencies have played a humanitarian role, with a presence in both Armenia and Azerbaijan".

Broers believes, however, that the door could be open for the UN to go further in pushing for access to the region – if it tried. The UN's refugee agency, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), already has offices in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, while the UNHCR was the only international organisation mentioned in the Russia-brokered [ceasefire statement](#) that ended Azerbaijan's 2020 offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh. The statement included an agreement that refugees and internally displaced persons could return to Nagorno-Karabakh under the control of UNHCR.

If Azerbaijan were to grant humanitarian access to Nagorno-Karabakh, "UN networks operating out of Baku and Azerbaijani cities nearer Karabakh could provide a more consistent humanitarian response, coordinating with counterparts in Armenia where necessary," Broers said.

"Azerbaijan wants to maximally reduce the involvement of third parties, particularly Western... as a matter of principle"

— Eldar Mamedov

Speaking on 21 September at a UN Security Council meeting, senior UN official Miroslav Jenča [said](#) the UN was ready to “support ongoing peace efforts, conduct humanitarian needs assessments and provide assistance”.

“We have repeatedly urged the UN to publicise Azerbaijan’s rejections [of requests for access], which has not been done,” said Naira Sultanyan, director of Armenia’s non-profit Democracy Development Foundation.

openDemocracy contacted the UNHCR offices in Armenia and Azerbaijan for comment.

The anonymous human rights source we spoke to also called for a separate UN mission to monitor the rights of Armenians living in border areas affected by Azerbaijani’s incursions into Armenian territory since 2020. (Armenia [claims](#) that Azerbaijan has occupied 150 square kilometres of Armenian territory since the 2020 war.) Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev has [repeatedly called](#) for a “Zangezur Corridor” through Armenian territory to connect to Nakhichevan, an Azerbaijani exclave on Armenia’s southwestern border.

Azerbaijan’s war in 2020

International humanitarian and human rights organisations, particularly United Nations agencies, have had problems accessing Nagorno-Karabakh since Azerbaijan’s war in 2020. Azerbaijan retook control of seven districts surrounding the enclave, as well as territory inside it. A Russian peacekeeping mission was deployed to [observe and ensure the ceasefire](#).

“Azerbaijan has not allowed this kind of interference, or pure humanitarian aid, to Karabakh since the 2020 war,” Narek Sukiasyan, an expert on Armenia’s foreign and security policy, told openDemocracy.

Sukiasyan said that Azerbaijan’s position – that Nagorno-Karabakh was an “internal affair” – was an effort to avoid “oversight from the international community”.

Eldar Mamedov, a Brussels-based foreign policy expert, told openDemocracy that the Azerbaijani government “wants to maximally reduce the involvement of third parties, particularly Western... as a matter of principle”.

Russia’s interest in leading mediation of the conflict and Turkey’s diplomatic support for Azerbaijan are also key factors in blocking access at international level, Mamedov said.

On 21 September, the European Union [said](#) it would provide €500,000 in humanitarian aid to people “affected” by the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh to “cover their basic needs through cash assistance, while providing them also with shelter and psychosocial support”. The EU currently operates a monitoring mission to conflict-affected areas of Armenia, but not Nagorno-Karabakh or the Lachin Corridor.

With estimates of Nagorno-Karabakh’s population reaching up to 120,000 people, openDemocracy asked the EU to explain the rationale for the amount, how it will be spent, and whether it would be spent in Nagorno-Karabakh itself, but has not received a response.

Sukiasyan told openDemocracy that the UN has a responsibility under its charter to protect civilians in cases where a state fails to protect basic human rights or commits ethnic cleansing or genocide – regardless of whether the state agrees or not. Meanwhile, former International Criminal Court prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo has [urged](#) the US to intervene in the “Armenian Genocide of 2023” over Nagorno-Karabakh.

“The charter still requires the UN Security Council to take action, which is unfortunately impossible in current circumstances because of the lack of consensus over the permanent member states’ conflicting interests, caused predominantly by the war in Ukraine,” Sukiasian told openDemocracy. UN’s permanent member states are China, France, Russia, the UK and the US.

But beyond humanitarian intervention, Sukiasyan said, the international community could “pressure” Azerbaijan to “allow at least UN agencies to enter the territory and monitor the situation or provide basic services to the local Armenian population”.

“These things are possible, but only if there is enough momentum built up and enough pressure exerted on the regime in Baku,” said Sukiasyan. “For this, no UN Security Council mandate is needed. It’s a matter of diplomatic work.”

By afternoon on 25 September, the Armenian government [reported](#) that 6,650 people had arrived from Nagorno-Karabakh. It remains unclear how many ethnic Armenians will opt to remain in the enclave under the Azerbaijani government’s “[reintegration](#)” programme – of which there are, as yet, [few details](#).

International human rights organisations like [FIDH](#), [Human Rights Watch](#) and [Freedom House](#) have called on Azerbaijan to ensure the rights of civilians in Nagorno Karabakh.

“With large numbers of Karabakh Armenians fleeing... it seems more likely to me that, at the most, a limited population will stay, perhaps just in [the region’s main city] Stepanakert, where Azerbaijani officials have said the Russian peacekeepers will remain in charge until 2025,” said Broers.

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