

Exodus of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh

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Just over 100,000 Armenians, almost the entire population of Nagorno-Karabakh, had left this territory by 2 October (the government in Yerevan had previously given the parastate's population at around 120,000). On that day, the organised mass evacuation of the Karabakh Armenians to Armenia also came to an end. Very few were expected to remain on the ground: these included sick and isolated people whom the officials in charge of the operation and volunteers had been unable to reach. They will be able to leave in the coming days with the help of the International Red Cross. The parastate's current leader, Samvel Shahramanyan, who last week signed a decree dissolving the structures of the unrecognised republic on 1 January 2024, has also reportedly remained in Nagorno-Karabakh. He and a group of his associates are expected to take charge of the search for those killed and missing after the Azerbaijani operation on 19–20 September. The government in Yerevan has announced the launch of assistance programmes for the refugees. From the start of October, each refugee will receive about \$100 monthly, plus about \$25 monthly to pay for utilities, for at least six months. This assistance does not apply to those who have homes in Armenia or are residents of care centres.

The exodus is the result of the Azerbaijani government's gradual and inevitable takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh after the forces of the weakened parastate (which was deprived of support from Armenia and Russia) were crushed in the Azerbaijani military operation on 19–20 September (see *'The end of Nagorno-Karabakh. A political earthquake in the South Caucasus'*). Azerbaijan has called on the Karabakh Armenians to stay and integrate into Azerbaijani society, while stressing that it respects their individual and personal decisions to leave. At the same time, the Azerbaijani government has issued arrest warrants for more than 300 'Armenian separatists', mainly officials of the parastate's former and current government and military (several arrests have already been made). On 1 October, the first UN mission in three decades, consisting of staff from the organisation's Baku office, arrived in Nagorno-Karabakh for a one-day visit and estimated that between 50 and 1000 Armenians were still in the territory.

Commentary

- The fear of persecution by the Azerbaijani state and by future Azerbaijani neighbours is the main reason driving the Karabakh Armenians to leave. According to the government in Baku, around 150,000 Azerbaijanis have expressed their wish to settle in Nagorno-Karabakh. It should be presumed that these are mostly people who were expelled from this territory and its neighbouring lands three decades ago, or their descendants. Both may now be driven by the logic of revenge (in the early 1990s, some 500,000 Azerbaijanis

fled the lands captured by the Armenians, including some 40,000 from the former Soviet Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast). Given the Armenians' total distrust of the Azerbaijani state and their concerns over the lack of democratic freedoms in it, the official assurances that they would enjoy the full rights accorded to its citizens failed to convince them to stay, especially as many of them could face criminal charges. The deputy head of the defence, security and anti-corruption committee of the Azerbaijani Mejlis (parliament), Hikmet Mamedov, announced back in August that those with Russian citizenship (their numbers are unknown, but probably significant), as well as those who had resettled there in the last three decades or violated Azerbaijani law, had to leave Nagorno-Karabakh. It appears that he was referring primarily to the political leadership and senior military commanders, but in the broadest interpretation this might include all Karabakh Armenians, as they could be accused of illegally residing in Azerbaijan or undermining the country's territorial integrity (for example, by using documents relating to their civil status that were issued by the parastate's government).

- It is possible that over time some of the Armenian refugees will return to Nagorno-Karabakh or, depending on the conditions and available opportunities in Azerbaijan, move between the two countries. The conclusion that they are holding out such hopes stems from the fact that the evacuation proceeded very hastily and the refugees were only able to take essential items with them. This stands in stark contrast to the evacuation of the Armenians from the areas outside Nagorno-Karabakh that they held until the Second Karabakh War in the autumn of 2020, which came under Azerbaijan's control as a result of agreements between Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia. At that time, people were leaving with all their possessions, and in some cases even removed the remains of the dead from cemeteries. The future of the centuries-old Armenian heritage in the region remains an open question: the Azerbaijani government has been accused in the past of destroying Armenian monuments, including cemeteries, i.a. in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic in the mid-2000s. The desire to protect this material heritage may motivate individuals and groups (for example, from among the Armenian clergy) either to stay put or return to Nagorno-Karabakh at a later time.
- In the short term, the presence of Karabakh refugees in Armenia will strengthen the local opposition, which makes it more likely that anti-government demonstrations will intensify and that Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan will face attempts to overthrow him. Contributing to the likelihood of this scenario is the fact that the evacuees include Karabakh politicians with links to the Armenian opposition and to two former Armenian presidents, Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, who held power from 1998 to 2018. These groups are oriented towards Russia, which in recent weeks has been calling almost openly for Pashinyan's ouster in the context of the crisis in Armenian-Russian relations (see '[A serious crisis in Armenian-Russian relations](#)'). It is conceivable that the extensive assistance provided during the evacuation by Russian peacekeepers, who had previously remained rather passive, was indeed aimed at bolstering the opposition in Armenia. Pressure from the refugees may spur the prime minister to try to 'jump forward' and conclude a peace treaty with Azerbaijan in the near future. Work on this document is reportedly very advanced; it deals with bilateral inter-state relations but does not cover the Karabakh issue, which Azerbaijan considers as resolved. In the longer term, the

presence of some of the Karabakh Armenians may prove beneficial for the Armenian economy, which has been struggling with a shortage of labour and the effects of a demographic crisis (it is reasonable to assume that most of the evacuees will remain in Armenia in the near future as they follow the developments surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh).

- There is no conclusive evidence that Azerbaijan's real goal is to drive all or the vast majority of the Armenians into exile, but it has certainly put them under pressure (Pashinyan has called the exodus 'ethnic cleansing'). Examples of this include Azerbaijan's blockade of the parastate, which continued in various forms between December last year and September this year (triggering a humanitarian crisis; see '[No special status, no Armenians? The prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh in a unitary Azerbaijan](#)'), repeated cuts in gas supplies, as well as statements by politicians such as the above-mentioned one by Azerbaijani MP Mamedov and the detentions of individuals facing arrest warrants (these people have been detained at the border post in the Lachin corridor which connects Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia). Those who have been detained so far include the former head of the Nagorno-Karabakh government, Russian-Armenian oligarch Ruben Vardanyan, former defence minister Levon Mnatsakanyan and three former Karabakh presidents, including Arayik Harutyunyan. The former head of the Nagorno-Karabakh foreign ministry, David Babayan, has voluntarily surrendered to the Azerbaijani authorities. Russian peacekeepers (around 2000 troops) are expected to remain in Nagorno-Karabakh until at least the autumn of 2025.
- The circumstances of the UN mission in Nagorno-Karabakh (the fact that it arrived after the evacuation, stayed on the ground for only a short time and visited very few sites) mean that its conclusions are of limited value; for example, it did not report any damage to civilian infrastructure or acts of violence against civilians after the ceasefire. Azerbaijan urgently agreed to the mission's arrival in order to improve its international image, which had suffered a blow from the military operation; according to media reports, President Ilham Aliyev had previously assured leading Western politicians that he would not take any such action.