

COLLOQUY

Azerbaijani Refugees and IDPs: Twenty Five Years of Displacement

Chingiz Ganizade*



* Chingiz Ganizade is a chairman of the "Democracy and Human Rights Committee", and Member of Azerbaijani Parliament

The longest and bloodiest conflict in the post-Soviet space – the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – has remained unresolved for over 25 years. For Azerbaijan, the conflict has led to numerous difficulties, and notably, the problem of refugees and IDPs. More than a million people, or roughly 13 per cent of the country's total population are forced to live as refugees or IDPs.

Caucasus International discussed this problem with Chingiz Ganizade, a leading expert in this field. Mr. Ganizade serves as a chairman of the “Democracy and Human Rights Committee” and is also a Member of the Milli Majlis (Azerbaijani Parliament). According to Chingiz Ganizade, the proportion of refugees and IDPs has over the past 25 years placed a significant economic burden on the Azerbaijani state, in addition to causing psychological trauma for refugees and IDPs. A new generation is growing up in camps and other refugees/IDP settlements. The double standards of international organizations towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict coupled with the ineffectiveness of the OSCE Minsk Group (tasked conflict resolution) have contributed to the continuation of one of the largest humanitarian crises in Europe – the refugee and IDP problem in Azerbaijan.

Historical background of the deportation of Azerbaijanis by Armenia

Touching upon the historical context of the problem, Mr. Ganizade noted that one of the most tragic pages of Azerbaijan's modern history is the forced mass displacement of a significant proportion of its population. The country's geostrategic location and its rich natural resources led to the deportation of parts of the Azerbaijani population from certain areas at the result of complex regional power dynamics. Azerbaijanis faced several phases of deportation from Armenia including in 1905, 1918-1920, 1948-1953 and 1988-1990.

The last phase of the mass deportation of Azerbaijanis began during the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In 1988-1990, Armenia perpetrated an ethnic cleansing policy targeting ethnic Azerbaijanis, causing around 250,000 people to flee their homes and seek refuge in Azerbaijan. During this period, about 50,000 Meskhetian Turks also took shelter in Azerbaijan, forced to leave

Uzbekistan as a result of turmoil and ethnic clashes.

Starting from 1998, Armenia and local Armenian separatists launched a process of ethnic cleansing in the territory of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (Region) of Azerbaijan. The cease-fire agreement reached in Bishkek in 1994 left roughly 20 percent of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territories (including Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent districts) under Armenian occupation. Not a single Azerbaijani was left in the occupied areas, and another 700,000 Azerbaijanis became IDPs. They were dispersed across 62 different cities and districts across the country, and found shelter in makeshift camps, in schools, kindergartens and other public places as well as in unfinished buildings and other places unsuitable for habitation.

The cease-fire agreement reached in Bishkek in 1994 left roughly 20 percent of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territories (including Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent districts) under Armenian occupation. Not a single Azerbaijani was left in the occupied areas, and another 700,000 Azerbaijanis became IDPs.

During this period, on February 26 1992, Armenian troops committed one of the gravest military crimes of recent history – the Khojaly genocide. Together with 366th Motor Rifle Regiment of the Soviet Army, Armenian military forces invaded the Azerbaijani town, destroyed the city, and mercilessly massacred its population. There were 3,000 people in the town at the time of attack (approximately half the total population), as the remainder had been forced to leave town during the four-month blockade. In total, 613 people were killed, and 1000 civilians suffered life-limiting injuries. 106 women, 63 children, 70 old men were killed. 8 families were completely destroyed; 130 children lost one parent, and 25 lost both parents. Of the 1275 civilians taken hostage; the fate of 150 remains unknown.

During this period, on February 26 1992, Armenian troops committed one of the gravest military crimes of recent history – the Khojaly genocide.

International response to Azerbaijan's refugee and IDP problem

An important focus of our discussion with Mr. Ganizade was the attitude of international organizations towards the refugee and IDP problem in Azerbaijan. He noted that continued diplomatic efforts by Azerbaijan have resulted in the adoption of resolutions confirming the right of Azerbaijani refugees and IDPs to return their homes by a number of major international organizations, including the General Assembly of the United Nations, United Nations Security Council, Parliamentary Assembly of the Coun-

cil of Europe, European Parliament, Organization for Islamic (OIC) Cooperation Council of Foreign Ministers, OIC Summits of Heads of States, as well as national governments. The UN Security Council adopted four resolutions (822, 853, 874, 884) demanding the unconditional withdrawal of Armenian forces from the occupied territories of Azerbaijan; these resolutions also called for the immediate return of Azerbaijani refugees and IDPs to the occupied areas.

The double standards of international organizations and major world powers and their failure to impose the terms of their own documents appears to be a factor in the ongoing, illegal occupation. When international organizations and their members are committed, resolutions are enforced within days and even hours.

Despite the resolutions, along with written and verbal calls by international organizations, Armenia continues to occupy 20 percent of the officially recognized territories of Azerbaijan, denying the right of Azerbaijani refugees and IDPs to return their homes. The double standards of international organizations and major world powers and their failure to impose the terms of their own documents appears to be a factor in the ongoing, illegal occupation. When international organizations and their members are committed, resolutions are enforced within days and even hours, such as the UN Security Council resolution against Iraq's occupation of Kuwait or against Gaddafi government in Libya. However current attitudes have given rise to a situation whereby four UN Security Council resolutions have remained unfulfilled. Moreover, the OSCE Minsk group, established in 1992 to lead negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, has failed to make progress on conflict resolution. The ineffectiveness of the Minsk Group and the lack of political will on the part of the Group's co-chairs (the US, Russia and France) has encouraged Yerevan to continue its occupation and the killing of innocent people.

The refugee and IDP problem as a mass human rights violation

Considering Azerbaijan's refugee and IDP problem within the context of human rights protections, Mr. Ganizade said that many organizations and states who promote themselves as protectors of human rights and who readily react to other events in our region are choosing to ignore the violation of the rights of more than one million Azerbaijani citizens.

Mr. Ganizade further noted that, not only are rights of refugees and IDPs being violated, but the Armenian army also poses a

threat to Azerbaijani civilians who live close to the contact line. Due to the ethnic cleansing in occupied Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenian-controlled areas close to the contact line are literally population free. However, there are a significant number of Azerbaijani settlements located in the close proximity to the contact line behind Azerbaijani troops. Those settlements are frequently under fire by Armenian troops; this has resulted in many civilian injuries and fatalities. Farmers are not able to work in their fields, and people cannot hold funerals during the day because of the threat of Armenian snipers.

The policy of the Azerbaijani state towards refugees and IDPs

We also discussed state policy towards refugees and IDPs. Mr. Ganizade highlighted the fact that since the country regained independence, comprehensive legislation has been passed on the socio-economic problems of refugees, IDPs and asylum seekers. The president has signed 55 decrees and orders, and the Azerbaijani Parliament has adopted 23 laws in this field including the ‘Law on the citizenship of the Republic of Azerbaijan’ (1998) and the ‘Law on status of refugees and IDPs’ and ‘Law on social protection of IDPs and other persons equal to them’ (1999). Under the ‘Law on the citizenship of the Republic of Azerbaijan’, refugees who took shelter in Azerbaijan in 1988-1992, including 250,000 Azerbaijanis who fled Armenia as the result of ethnic cleansing, are accorded Azerbaijani citizenship. However they also retain their refugee status (including all entailed social benefits) and the right to return their homes. The state provides all the necessary assistance to improve living conditions of the refugee and IDP population of Azerbaijan, and they benefit from a wide array of benefits, including exemption from many taxes and payments including paying for public utilities, tuition fees and etc. People belonging to these categories also receive financial aid on a monthly basis.

The state has long been committed to the resolution of the socio-economic problems of refugees and IDPs. Because a significant proportion of IDPs used to live in makeshift camps, university dormitories, schools and kindergartens, and unfinished buildings unfit for habitation, the housing problem of IDPs has been a key priority within the state policy towards refugees and IDPs. With financing from the State Oil Fund, many new settlements

were built to resettle IDPs from tent camps. In 2007 the last – twelfth - tent camp was closed down, and its inhabitants moved into newly built houses. In addition, as the result of the state’s efforts, the poverty rate among IDPs dropped from 74 percent to 18 percent, from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s. IDPs who worked in the public sector prior to deportation continue to receive their wages, and many refugees have found job placements through state assistance.

All these achievements have been no easy task for Azerbaijan, and the problems of refugees and IDPs are far from being resolved. Notably, 400,000 IDPs still live in old buildings that lack the basic necessities. In this respect, due to the magnitude of the problem, Azerbaijan still needs the support of international organizations and donors in order to better address the problems

There is only one way to reach a sustainable and comprehensive resolution of this problem: the liberation of the occupied territories and the return of the exiled populations to their homes.

of refugees and IDPs. Azerbaijan has one of the world’s highest per capita numbers of refugees and IDPs. Taking care of the needs of over one million refugees and IDPs for the past 25 years has imposed a significant burden on the state. There is only one way to reach a sustainable and comprehensive resolution of this problem: the liberation of the occupied territories and the return of the exiled populations to their homes.

Mr. Ganizade also stated that Armenia’s refusal to accept peaceful resolution based on mutual compromise should not be a pretext for 25 years of human rights violations, as experienced by Azerbaijani refugees and IDPs. All refugees and IDPs should be allowed to return to their homes as a matter of urgency. Azerbaijani IDPs should be allowed to return not only to the occupied districts adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh, but also to Nagorno-Karabakh itself. The return of the Azerbaijani community to Nagorno-Karabakh and their peaceful coexistence with the region’s Armenian community is an important guarantee of the successful resolution of the future status of the region. Otherwise, the current mono-ethnic situation in Nagorno-Karabakh will preclude a sustainable agreement on the status of the region.