

Azerbaijani Community of the Nagorno Karabakh Region: Deported Community's Quest for Peace, Justice and Returning Home

Rovshan Rzayev^{*}

Azerbaijan has experienced one of the harshest refugee and IDP crises of modern times during its 25 years of independence which made about 13 percent of the country's population to live lives of refugee and IDP. The Azerbaijani Community of Nagorno-Karabakh (ACNK) who was forcefully displaced by Armenia during ethnic cleansing in the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh is a part of the huge refugee and IDP population of Azerbaijan. The ACNK supports the peaceful resolution of the conflict in accordance with international legal norms, and in order to accelerate the peace process, the ACNK has offered to launch direct negotiations between the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. Despite all support provided by Azerbaijani state to solve socio-economic problems of the community no support can fully heal the wounds inflicted by war, occupation, massacres and ethnic cleansing. The only way to truly heal these wounds is through the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, with peace in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the community's return to their native lands and homes.



^{*} Rovshan Rzayev is a Member of the Board of the Azerbaijani Community of the Nagorno-Karabakh Region of the Republic of Azerbaijan and a member of Milli Majlis (Azerbaijani Parliament)

Azerbaijan has experienced one of the harshest refugee and IDP crises of modern times during its 25 years of independence. The country currently has more than one million refugees and IDPs; every ninth Azerbaijani citizen was forced to leave home, left without shelter and compelled to build a new life from scratch. More than 10 percent of the country's population is classified as a refugee or IDP. Managing their socio-economic welfare has imposed a serious burden on the Azerbaijani state.

The Azerbaijani Community of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of the Republic of Azerbaijan (ACNK) underwent ethnic cleansing during Armenia's occupation of the region. They are trying to rebuild their lives, help the members of the community to resolve the various problems they face, and protect and develop the community's cultural heritage. Its efforts are also directed at raising international awareness of the rights violations that have occurred and initiating a dialogue with the region's Armenian

Unfortunately, the refugee and IDP crises facing Azerbaijan today have been largely ignored by international media, humanitarian organizations, and international human rights activists.

community. Unfortunately, the refugee and IDP crises facing Azerbaijan today have been largely ignored by international media, humanitarian organizations, and international human rights activists. Despite all these challenges, the Azerbaijani community of Nagorno-Karabakh remains committed to the peaceful resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and neighborly coexistence with the region's Armenian community, and still hopes to return home one day.

The Azerbaijani Community of the Nagorno-Karabakh region as a part of the national refugee and IDP problem

Out of more than one million refugee and IDP population of Azerbaijan, 250,000 refugees were deported from their native lands in Armenia in 1988-1989. In 1990-1994, 700,000 IDPs were forced to leave their homes when Armenia occupied the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan and the seven adjacent districts. About 50,000 Meskhetian Turks from Uzbekistan took shelter in Azerbaijan in the beginning of 1990s when unrest in the Fergana valley forced them to flee the country. In addition, several thousand refugees from Afghanistan, Chechnya and other countries have chosen Azerbaijan as their new home in search of a better life.

The Azerbaijani community of the Nagorno-Karabakh region forms a significant part of the country's refugee and IDP population. The community consists of ethnic Azerbaijanis who lived in the territories belonging to the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region of Azerbaijan, and were forcefully deported from their homes at the result of ethnic cleansing carried out by Armenia's army and separatist forces. The 65,000 community members have held IDP status in Azerbaijan since 1992. Today community members are dispersed across the country and live in 59 different districts of Azerbaijan. For more than 20 years, IDP life has created serious socio-economic and moral problems for the community. Members of this community encounter a range of difficulties on a daily basis, including problems with housing and employment, access to education and healthcare, and psychological trauma as the result of deportation and two decades of life as an IDP. These difficulties have further united the community from within, and it has mobilized itself to resolve the problems encountered by its members. The community has been trying to address these problems with the help of the Azerbaijani state, and has never lost faith in peaceful conflict resolution and the right to return.

The community consists of ethnic Azerbaijanis who lived in the territories belonging to the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region of Azerbaijan, and were forcefully deported from their homes at the result of ethnic cleansing carried out by Armenia's army and separatist forces.

Community mobilization and main areas of activity

The recent establishment of an organizational structure has been one of the important events in the life of the Community. The ACNK was first established in line with the document signed at the first additional meeting of the CSCE (OSCE) Ministerial Council, held in Helsinki in March 1992. When the CSCE (OSCE) Minsk Group was established, Armenia and Azerbaijan were recognized as the two sides of the conflict and the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities of the region were accepted as the interested parties. According to this mandate, ACNK has participated in negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia for the resolution of the conflict on several occasions since 1992. In 2006, the ACNK was officially registered with the Ministry of Justice of Azerbaijan as a public union. Gaining formal status opened up new opportunities for the community's activity. The first congress in Baku on June 5, 2009 marked another key step towards improving the organization's structure.

As an organized union, the community tries to help to resolve the socio-economic problems of its members, to represent its members before the international community in order to raise awareness of rights violations experienced by the community, and to support the peaceful solution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

One of the major directions of the community's activity is to monitor and analyze the social and economic problems facing its members, and with the assistance of the state, help resolve these problems. At the same time, the community aims to promote international projects and programs on providing assistance to IDPs in Azerbaijan, cooperating with international and local NGOs in such projects and programs. Protecting the cultural heritage of the Azerbaijani population of the Nagorno-Karabakh region and realizing various projects in this direction; collecting data on the population, nature and the environmental situation, cultural heritage, and historical monuments in the occupied areas also features on the list of the ACNK's main activities.

The Community receives significant assistance from the Azerbaijani state for resolving social and economic problems and improving the living standards of its members within the framework of various projects. The ACNK also cooperates with various state agencies and international organizations regarding the fate of the prisoners of war and missing people from the Nagorno-Karabakh region, working to secure their return to Azerbaijan. It is also engaged in starting legal proceeding in international courts in relation to the rights violations caused by the occupation and ethnic cleansing, and reaching out to the international community.

The Community's view on the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

The ACNK supports the peaceful resolution of the conflict in accordance with international legal norms, and has supported peace initiatives ever since it was established. In order to accelerate the peace process, the ACNK has offered to launch direct negotiations between the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. The Community aims to establish relations with the Armenian population

of the region via public diplomacy and seeks opportunities for dialogue with them through international organizations. This kind of dialogue can facilitate the restoration of the good neighborly relations that were lost due to the 25 years of conflict, improve mutual understanding of the concerns of both communities, and create mutual trust. These can in turn play a crucial role in bringing sustainable peace to Nagorno-Karabakh, achieving peaceful co-existence and the re-integration of the Karabakh Armenians into Azerbaijani society.

The Community aims to establish relations with the Armenian population of the region via public diplomacy and seeks opportunities for dialogue with them through international organizations.

However, due to the resistance of Armenia's political authorities, it has not been possible to launch an inter-community dialogue between the Azerbaijanis and Armenians of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Former Armenian President Robert Kocharian's statement about the existence of "ethnic incompatibility" between Azerbaijanis and Armenians can be seen as part of this policy. On January 16, 2003 Robert Kocharian said that Azerbaijanis and Armenians were "ethnically incompatible" and that it was impossible for the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh to live within an Azerbaijani state.¹ Speaking on January 30 2006 in Strasbourg, Council of Europe Secretary-General Walter Schwimmer said Kocharian's comment was tantamount to warmongering. Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe President Peter Schieder said that he hoped Kocharian's remark had been incorrectly translated, adding that "since its creation, the Council of Europe has never heard the phrase "ethnic incompatibility"".² These words were not the only expression of anti-Azerbaijan racism by the high-ranking Armenian officials. In 2010, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, in his meeting with Armenian diaspora journalists, talked about the superiority of Armenians over other nations, including the Azerbaijanis, who he described as a "Turkic Muslim nomadic tribe".³ Such statements impede preparations for inter-community dialogue in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the Azerbaijani community is resolute about its approach to the importance of the inter-com-

1 Radio Free Europe, Nagorno-Karabakh: Timeline Of The Long Road To Peace, Rferl.org, February 10, 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1065626.html>

2 Radio Free Europe, Newsline, Rferl.org, February 3, 2003, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1142847.html>

3 APA, Permanent representative of Azerbaijan to UN addresses UN Secretary-General concerning Armenian president's remark, APA.az, November 01, 2010, <http://en.apa.az/news/133297>

munity dialogue and will continue to search for platforms for dialogue via various international organizations.

Armenia, citing the right to self-determination, seeks either full annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh or its recognition as an independent state, and denies the right of Azerbaijani refugees and IDPs to return their homes. However, it should be considered that Armenians used their right to self-determination in the beginning of the twentieth century, and established an independent state: the Republic of Armenia. The Armenian community of Nagorno-Karabakh also exercised its right to self-determination, and opted to stay within Azerbaijan as an autonomous region. Azerbaijan undertook to protect the rights of its Armenian citizens in Nagorno-Karabakh. During 70 years of peaceful coexistence from the beginning of 1920s to the end of 1980s, Karabakh Armenians never encountered ethnic, political or economic discrimination, and developed their ethnic identity, language and culture. The region was one of the most developed regions of the country, with living standards above the national average.

However, no support can fully heal the wounds inflicted by war, occupation, massacres and ethnic cleansing. The only way to truly heal these wounds is through the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, with peace in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the community's return to their native lands and homes.

The Azerbaijani Community of Nagorno-Karabakh has always received support from the Azerbaijan state in addressing the community's social and economic problems. However, no support can fully heal the wounds inflicted by war, occupation, massacres and ethnic cleansing. The only way to truly heal these wounds is through the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, with peace in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the community's return to their native lands and homes. The community's violated rights should be restored, their 25-year displacement – the one of the biggest human rights violations of modern times – should be ended, and the international community should be immediately mobilized to resolve the conflict in order to end the suffering of the entire community. The ACNK backs the resolution of the conflict in accordance with the principles repeatedly stated by Azerbaijan: peaceful coexistence with the Armenian community of the Nagorno-Karabakh region with the highest possible autonomy within the borders of the Azerbaijani state.