

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	379
Land:	Armenien
Kilde:	EurasiaNet
Titel:	Armenia to offer refugee status to displaced Karabakhis
Udgivet:	30. oktober 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	11. april 2024

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Armenia to offer refugee status to displaced Karabakhis

Karabakh Armenians have long held passports of the Republic of Armenia, but it turns out they're not Armenian citizens. Now they must choose between citizenship and a newly created special status.

Lilit Shahverdyan </people/lilit-shahverdyan> Oct 30, 2023



Displaced persons from Karabakh in Goris, Armenia, on September 30 (photo by Milena Avetisyan)

In a cabinet session on October 26, the Armenian government approved <https://news.am/eng/news/789049.html> the creation of a "temporary protected status" for displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said that the new status would facilitate the protection of their rights in the local and international arenas.

The law automatically applies to the over 100,000 ethnic Armenians of Karabakh who fled to Armenia following Azerbaijan's forceful seizure of the territory on 19-20 September. That offensive - which came after a 9-month blockade that had caused severe shortages of food, fuel, medicine, and other essential supplies - resulted in the disbanding of the local army, the Artsakh Defense

ber 21. A few days later, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic itself, which had governed the region for three decades, began the process of formal dissolution.

The Armenian government is only now beginning to grapple with the issue of the displaced persons' status.

Those eligible for the new temporary protected status are persons registered as residents of Nagorno-Karabakh, persons living in Armenia or abroad whose last registered address was in Nagorno-Karabakh, and persons who were not registered in Nagorno-Karabakh but lived there and were registered by the Armenian Migration and Citizenship Service as entering the country after September 19.

Those who hold citizenship of a country other than Armenia are not eligible, as their protection is deemed to be under the jurisdiction of the relevant country.

It's not clear whether the new law applies to the roughly 20,000 displaced persons who resettled in Armenia after Azerbaijan captured territories in the 2020 Second Karabakh War that had previously been administered by the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Refugees from Hadrout, Shusha, and other regions have long sought a legal status defining their position but were not granted any after their displacement three years ago.

The other option former Karabakh residents have, Prime Minister Pashinyan said <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32653936.html>, is to seek Armenian citizenship.

This remark triggered surprise and offense among many Karabakhis, who thought they already were citizens, since they have been issued Armenian passports since 1999.

an advisor to the minister of justice, told CivilNet that the passports were issued under an agreement between the ministers of internal affairs of the Republic of Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic as international travel documents.

"The government has asserted its position in numerous cases, even presented this position in the European Court, that the fact that the people of Nagorno-Karabakh have passports of RA does not mean that they are considered RA citizens," said Sujyan.

Indeed, Karabakh Armenians' passports bear the special code "070," and they have never enjoyed the political rights of citizens of Armenia such as the vote.

The new law allows them to apply to become full-fledged Armenian citizens and gain political rights and social entitlements such as a state pension. But doing so will render them ineligible for the social assistance provided to those registered as refugees.

The new protected status has a term of one year and can be extended through a new decision. The refugee certificates will be issued in January.

According to the UN Refugee Convention of 1951, which Armenia is a signatory to, all persons recognized as refugees in Armenia will be regarded as such in all other signatory countries as well.

Artyom Sujyan, the advisor to the justice minister, said that refugee status holders get certain benefits and stronger guarantees in other countries and cannot be expelled or deported from states where they seek refuge.

Meanwhile, the Armenian government has allocated one-off financial assistance of 100,000 AMD (\$250) to all displaced persons (including children) from Nagorno-Karabakh and 50,000 AMD

over rental prices and utilities. For November and December, a separate program was approved providing additional monthly payments of 40,000 AMD (\$100) to all the refugees.

Lilit Shahverdyan is a journalist based in Stepanakert.

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