

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

<b>Bilagsnr.:</b>	<b>290</b>
Land:	Aserbajdsjan
Kilde:	Institute for War and Peace Reporting
Titel:	Returning to a Changed Karabakh
Udgivet:	26. november 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	7. januar 2021

Document #2041567

## IWPR – Institute for War and Peace Reporting

### Returning to a Changed Karabakh

Thousands of residents have already come back, but many face a challenging future.

By Gayane Mkrtchyan

When 36-year-old Siranush Sargsyan returned to her hometown of Stepanakert right after the end of the recent war, she said that it felt like coming back from the dead.

“Nothing is going to be all right again, we have lost half of our homeland, we have buried our relatives, and our families are devastated,” Sargsyan said. “I simply feel responsibility to those who died in the war and to those who fought in it... We understand that there is no home and no life without women and children and so we must return.”

Sargsyan, whose apartment building was partially destroyed in shelling, said that it would be a long struggle to get back to normal.

“The city is trying to restore electricity and gas supplies, very basic living conditions. Shops are opening, but there are some shops that are closed and empty. I will stay here and along with my main job [in education] I am ready to do other things as well. Now, we have to work hard, we can no longer afford that carefree life we used to have. We must help those in need; we must live here despite the difficulties and challenges. I am telling myself this all the time. Everyone must do their best to bring our homeland back to life, with their presence and work,” she concluded.

According to officials, more than 13,000 residents of Karabakh who fled due to the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan have already returned home. Others are being urged to do so by Yerevan and the de facto government in Stepanakert, who have promised that Karabakh residents will be excused from paying utility bills as well as for mobile and internet services for the next year.

But many will be unable to return to homes either destroyed by the fighting or in areas due to be handed over to Azerbaijani control as part of the November 10 ceasefire agreement.

“Our citizens, who lost their homes as a result of the war, will be mainly settled in Stepanakert, as well as in other settlements of the republic,” Arayik Harutyunyan, the de facto president of Karabakh, announced. “Initially, they will be accommodated in hotels and apartments rented by the government, until the issue of their housing is resolved with state funds.”

Karabakh ombudsman Artak Beglaryan posted a video on his Facebook page urging his compatriots to return, announcing, “My family is already in Stepanakert and I urge the people who have the opportunity, in terms of their safety, to return to their homes.”

Russian peacekeepers have already been deployed to the region, and Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan stressed that this would allow at least a partial return of those displaced.

“This is extremely important,” he said in an interview with the Public Television of Armenia on November 13. “Artsakh remains what it is because of the people living there. The damage must be restored, infrastructure must be rebuilt, and investments are needed to create an environment for peaceful and productive life. Currently, the peacekeepers are ensuring the safety of Armenians, at least in a part of Nagorny Karabakh. The right of return for our compatriots from other parts has been noted,” he said.

Some fear they have a long wait ahead. During the fighting, Yerazik Avanesyan, 34, sought sanctuary in Yerevan with her three children. She wants to return to her home in the small town of Hadrut, but this is the part of the territory that will be handed to Azerbaijan.

Avanesyan, head of the department of culture and youth at the Hadrut regional administration, left without taking any belongings or documents as she assumed she would be back in a few days. Now, she says, she has lost everything.

“Who could have imagined that we would be left without a home, without an address, without a name and without a homeland? We are full of hopes to return to Hadrut, maybe not today or in the coming months, but we see such a perspective. One way or another, we need to return to Artsakh [the Armenian name for Karabakh] and rebuild our country,” Avanesyan said.

Nearly 2,000 Russian peacekeeping forces will now be deployed along the entire line of contact and in the Lachin corridor, while the Armenians are withdrawing their armed forces. The peacekeepers will stay for five years, with the right to extend their term for another five years.

Karabakh residents have mixed feelings about their presence. Sargsyan said that the older generation who recalled the days of the Soviet Union had more trust in the Russian peacekeepers, but that younger people were less impressed.

“After all, we lived in an independent country and we were not used to being protected by someone else,” she continued. “Therefore, the attitude towards the Russian peacekeepers is ambiguous. It is not easy to see Russian flags when we were used to the flags of Armenia and Artsakh, so even the symbols are very difficult to accept. But, as it is said, everything is relative, and if we compare it with the fact that Azerbaijani flags could have been in Dadivank [a ninth century monastery in Kelbajar], the presence of Russian peacekeepers gives some hope that at least it was possible to preserve something.”

Residents of Hadrut and Shushi hope that they might be able to return if peacekeepers are also deployed in their areas.

Alena Melkumyan, 35, had lived in Shushi all her life. When she was forced to flee, she took nothing with her except clothes for her 18-month-old daughter, assuming she would be able to return in a couple of days.

“It’s hard to believe that all of this could have happened,” Melkumyan said. “I worked as a tourist guide and know the surrounding forests well. They are so dense that you can hardly walk through the woods. It is no coincidence that the area is called ‘the devil’s gorge.’ They said that military equipment was transported through this gorge and that way they managed to reach the city-fortress of Shushi, but I think it is impossible. I left Shushi when the Azerbaijani armed forces attacked Ghazanchetsots. First, I went to Goris, then I stayed with relatives in the village of Khachardzan in Tavush region.”

Her parents, aunt and brothers will now settle in Stepanakert, and Melkumyan has little choice but to join them there. But she said she could not stop thinking about returning to her home.

“The Azerbaijanis have not yet entered Shushi, the roads are blocked on both sides, it is also difficult to trust the peacekeepers... so far we just have to wait,” Melkumyan said.

And Avanesyan said that while the presence of peacekeepers in Hadrut might convince more people to return, coexistence was as yet an impossibility.

“But how can Armenians and Azerbaijanis live in the same place, when every Azeri is a potential Safarov [an Azerbaijani officer who murdered an Armenian colleague during a Nato training session in Budapest in 2004]?” she asked.

“It is very dangerous, because we have to raise children, send them to school, for that reason living with Azerbaijanis is out of the question,” Avanesyan continued. “Today, we are people with no name and no address, extremely depressed. We always fight, our strength is in weapons, whether in war or in life. We are fighting for the right to live on our own land.”

**ecoi.net summary:**

Article on the return situation  
in Nagorno-Karabakh after the  
recent escalation of armed conflict

**Countries:**

Armenia, Azerbaijan

**Source:**

[IWPR – Institute for War and Peace  
Reporting](#)

**Original link:**

<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/returning-changed-karabakh>

**Document type:**

Media Report

**Language:**

English

**Published:**

26 November 2020

**Document ID:**

2041567

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