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Nagorno-Karabakh: Humanitarian impact of the military offensive

OVERVIEW

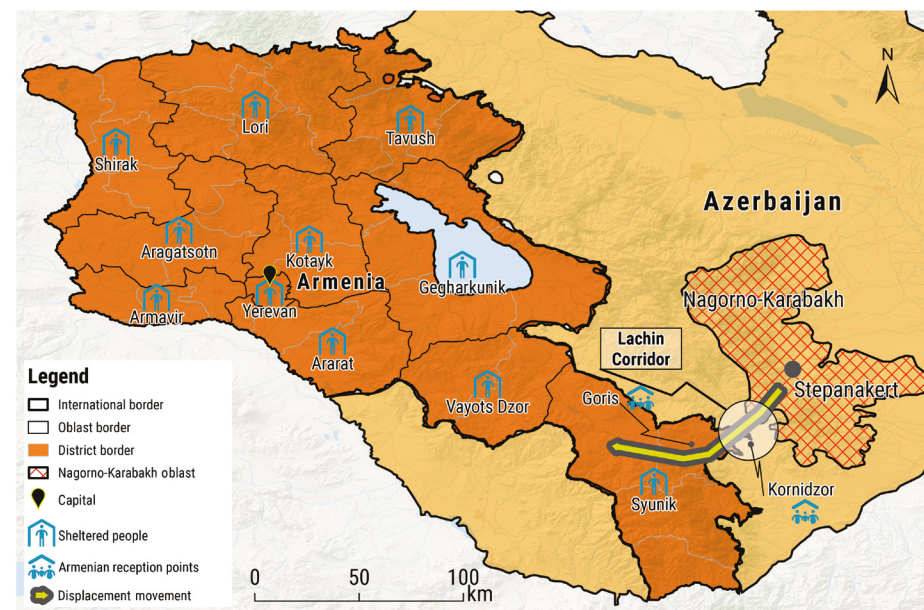
On 19 September 2023, after a nine-month blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijani forces launched a 24-hour military operation in the region. The next day, the de facto government of the enclave lost most of its military positions and surrendered (ICG 29/09/2023). On 28 September, Samvel Shahramanyan, President of the de facto government, announced that the republic would cease to exist by 1 January 2024. The republic was established in 1991 after the declaration of the region's independence from the Soviet Union, although it did not receive international recognition (CNN 28/09/2023; Al Jazeera 28/09/2023; BBC 03/10/2023). The current developments follow decades of protracted conflict, with intermittent escalations and two major armed conflicts between 1988–1994 and between October–November 2020 (HRW 23/09/2023; BBC 28/09/2023).

The recent military operations have killed more than 200 people and wounded over 400 (JPost 20/09/2023; The Guardian 20/09/2023). As at 3 October 2023, the conflict had displaced over 100,500 people, including at least 26,000 children, to Armenia through the Lachin corridor. This total is more than 80% of the estimated 120,000 inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh (UNHCR 03/10/2023 a; The Guardian 02/10/2023; ECHO 30/09/2023; STC 29/09/2023; TWP 29/09/2023).

Neither Russian peacekeepers nor the Government of Armenia have intervened in the recent fighting. The Armenian Government has prepared to receive ethnic Armenians displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh. In a 29 September report, Russia stated that its failure to prevent the conflict escalation on 19 September was the result of Azerbaijan's late notification of its intentions for military action. On the other hand, Russia's military activities in Ukraine are considered to have limited its role as mediator and peacekeeper between Armenia and Azerbaijan (ICG 29/09/2023).

As at 4 October, Azerbaijani forces had arrested four former Nagorno-Karabakh government officials on charges of terrorism and sedition (Eurasianet 04/10/2023). It is not clear what their status is. Three other Nagorno-Karabakh officials have fled to Armenia (Reuters 03/10/2023).

Northern Nagorno-Karabakh population movement into Armenia



Source: ACAPS using ECHO 02/10/2023

About this report

Aim: this report provides an update on the humanitarian impact of the 19 September military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh, with the majority of people having fled to Armenia, and highlights the expected scope and scale of the crisis. The report also provides a contextual overview and the aggravating factors that could further affect the population.

Methods: the report is based on a secondary data review of publicly available sources.

Limitations: access constraints in Nagorno-Karabakh hamper humanitarian data and information collection, resulting in information gaps and a lack of holistic understanding of the crisis' impact on those remaining in the area.



Political developments

On 28 September, President Samvel Shahramanyan of Nagorno-Karabakh announced the region's planned dissolution and reintegration into Azerbaijan by 1 January 2024 following a ceasefire, indicating the potential end of the conflict (CNN 28/09/2023; Al Jazeera 28/09/2023). This planned dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh's government and state institutions would allow Azerbaijan to regain control of the enclave after three decades of existing as an autonomous region (Al Jazeera 28/09/2023).

Azerbaijan stated that it will treat the ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh as its citizens should they choose to stay in the region (TOI 23/09/2023; DW 23/09/2023).

Anticipated scope and scale

- Transit towns in Armenia, including Kornidzor and Goris, are expected to struggle to cope with the sudden influx of refugees (The National 26/09/2023; ICG 29/09/2023 ; UN 02/10/2023 a). Despite Armenian solidarity in assisting refugees, the influx will stretch health, shelter, and education resources, which remain priority needs for ethnic Armenians crossing from Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia (UNHCR 03/10/2023 b; UN 02/10/2023 b).
- There is a risk of further conflict and reprisal attacks between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces along the borders between Kelbajar (Azerbaijan) and Gegharkunik (Armenia) regions. The observed build-up of Azerbaijani troops along these areas before the military operation increases the risk of provocation and conflict between the two countries (ICG 29/09/2023 and 03/10/2023).
- The Armenian Government has appealed to the international community for support and increased humanitarian aid and accused Azerbaijan of ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh (CBS 28/09/2023; BBC 26/09/2023; Caritas 28/09/2023; CFR 04/10/2023).
- The planned dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh as a state along with its government institution has resulted in backlash from Armenians, who feel that their Government is not doing enough to guarantee the sovereignty of Nagorno-Karabakh. Protests have erupted in Yerevan (the capital of Armenia), resulting in the detention and arrest of about 140 people as at 26 September (BBC 26/09/2023). The leader of the Armenian National Committee of America, an Armenian lobbyist group based in the US, has seemingly called for the assassination of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan for making concessions to Azerbaijan's truce conditions (AA 26/09/2023).

Humanitarian access constraints

- Azerbaijan has controlled access to the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave since 10 November 2020, limiting humanitarian supply to the region (ICG accessed 05/10/2023). Azerbaijan had allowed only the International Committee of the Red Cross to carry out humanitarian operations in Nagorno-Karabakh but revoked their access to the Lachin corridor and the Aghdam route during the blockade. Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh regranted them access the day before the 19 September military offensive (ICRC 25/07/2023).
- The UN had not accessed Nagorno-Karabakh since 1991 prior to their 2 October monitoring mission (UN 02/10/2023 c; The Guardian 02/10/2023). Despite calls from the international community to the Azerbaijani Government to ensure unimpeded humanitarian access to the region, it remains unclear whether the UN will continue to have constant access to Nagorno-Karabakh (Govt. UK 05/10/2023).

CONTEXT OVERVIEW

Regional tension

Azerbaijan and Armenia have been in dispute over the borders of Nagorno-Karabakh since 1988, before the fall of the Soviet Union. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, ethnic Armenians declared their self-rule in a 1991 referendum (CFR accessed 06/10/2023; ICG 14/12/2006). War between Armenia and Azerbaijan ensued until 1994, when the two countries agreed on a ceasefire, but intermittent clashes and escalations continued (ICG accessed 05/10/2023). In 2020, major conflict erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It lasted for 44 days and ended with a Russian-brokered peace deal that gave Azerbaijan control over parts of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Since the 2020 conflict, Armenia's relationship with Russia, its main regional ally, has been strained. Analysts suggest that Russia did not intervene in Azerbaijan's blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh because of the war in Ukraine and its desire for closer ties with Azerbaijan (Atlantic Council 13/07/2023; JAMnews 04/09/2023). The lack of Russian support has led Armenia to slowly pursue relations with the US, including conducting joint military exercises (Al Jazeera 20/09/2023). This fragile relationship between Russia and Armenia peaked with Russia's failure to intervene in Azerbaijan's 19 September military incursion into Nagorno-Karabakh, despite having peacekeepers stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh (ECFR 28/09/2023; France 24 11/09/2023).

Türkiye, an ally of Azerbaijan, has expressed its support of the latter's bid to retake Nagorno-Karabakh (Al Jazeera 20/09/2023; ECFR 28/09/2023). This support, along with Israel's, of Azerbaijan's better-equipped and more powerful military is partly why Armenia did not engage Azerbaijan during the escalation of hostilities on 19 September (Caspian News 01/09/2023; Al Jazeera 01/10/2020).

IMPACT OVERVIEW

People remaining in Nagorno-Karabakh

The number of ethnic Armenians remaining in the region is unclear, as accurate population figures have not been available even before the military offensive. Reports suggest that 80% of the population has fled to Armenia, but the UN, which gained access to the region for the first time in 30 years in early October, indicates that there could be less than 1,000 ethnic Armenians remaining in Nagorno-Karabakh (UN 02/10/2023 c; UNHCR 03/10/2023 a; The Guardian 02/10/2023). Those left behind include the wounded, chronically ill, and elderly populations (MSN 04/10/2023). They have limited social protection and are forced to care for themselves despite their vulnerabilities (Reuters 29/09/2023; UN 03/10/2023). Ethnic Armenians left behind in Nagorno-Karabakh face the risk of targeted violence and protection concerns, such as forced detentions and arbitrary arrests (Armenpress 04/10/2023).

Landmines have been present in the region since the 1988–1994 conflict and continue to affect civilians. The conflict has increased the number of unexploded ordnance, particularly cluster munitions, on agricultural land (The HALO Trust accessed 11/01/2023; Al Jazeera 09/11/2021). The presence of unexploded ordnance and mines from previous conflicts in the region further exposes its population to injury and death (Armenpress 19/09/2023).

People displaced to Armenia

Shelter

The scale of displacement is large and likely to increase beyond current figures (PBS 28/09/2023). The displaced population faces increased emergency shelter needs as they settle in Armenian cities such as Ararat, Kotayk, Syunik, and Yerevan, which are struggling to provide accommodation and meet the shelter needs of ethnic Armenians (UNHCR 02/10/2023; UN 02/10/2023 b).

As at 3 October, the Armenian Government had provided temporary shelter to 48,649 of the 85,975 displaced people registered. A total of 100,514 had arrived in the country, 31% of whom were children and 18% the elderly (UNHCR 03/10/2023). Armenia had initially pledged to host around 40,000 displaced families; the influx of displaced people beyond the Government's estimated capacity will require further emergency assistance (BBC 27/09/2023; UNHCR 02/10/2023). Temporary shelters currently housing the refugees include schools, social centres, and hotels, but even these are inadequate. There is a need for both emergency shelter and longer-term accommodation (UNHCR 03/10/2023). As at 2 October, 64,500 displaced people across Armenia were in need of shelter, including 23,600 in Yerevan, 14,000 in Syunik, and 5,700 in Kotayk (UNHCR 02/10/2023).

Health

A fuel explosion on 25 September at a depot in Stepanakert, Khankendi, in Nagorno-Karabakh killed 175 people and injured more than 200 (NYT 26/09/2023; ABC 27/09/2023; DW 23/09/2023; WHO 01/10/2023). Armenia has sent a team of doctors to treat victims and manage the medical situation in Nagorno-Karabakh (NYT 26/09/2023). The injured have also been evacuated to Armenia for treatment, even with health facilities in Nagorno-Karabakh remaining operational (OCHA 02/10/2023). As a result, health clinics in Yerevan are overwhelmed, increasing the need to strengthen burn care capacity (WHO 01/10/2023).

The influx of ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh with acute health needs has also overwhelmed the Armenian health sector. Most of these refugees have experienced psychological and physical trauma, requiring emergency medical care (WHO 01/10/2023). Some of the arriving refugees also require urgent and specialised care for chronic diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension, cancer, and cardiological diseases, further stretching the health system Nagorno-Karabakh (UN 03/10/2023). To cope with the influx, the Government has set up more medical centres, particularly in Armenian transit towns such as Goris (NEWS.am 26/09/2023). Armenia has also integrated 2,000 nurses and 2,200 doctors from Nagorno-Karabakh to increase the capacity of the Armenian health system in the backdrop of the refugee influx (UN 03/10/2023). Aid and development organisations have also been working to strengthen the capacity of the Armenian health sector to meet the urgent medical needs of the affected population following Armenia's request for support (WHO 01/10/2023; OCHA 02/10/2023).

Mental health and psychosocial support is a priority health need to address the psychological trauma of ethnic Armenians (WHO 01/10/2023). In response, UN teams have deployed psychologists and mental trauma specialists to the medical clinics serving them (UN 02/10/2023 b).

Food security

Emergency food assistance is another priority need for the refugees (WFP 29/09/2023; IFRC 30/09/2023). Following the nine-month blockade, the 19 September conflict escalation, and the subsequent reopening of the Lachin corridor on 24 September, displaced people arriving in Armenian refugee reception centres through the corridor have been dealing with shock and hunger (IRC 29/09/2023). These refugees lack the means to meet their basic needs, having lost their sources of income and access to agricultural land and having left their assets behind.

The influx of refugees into Armenia could aggravate food insecurity in the country, where 30% of households were food-insecure according to a WFP Food Security and Vulnerability assessment carried out between December 2022 and January 2023. Only one in five Armenian households was food-secure during the assessment period, and more than half of

the population was at risk of becoming food-insecure in the face of any shocks or crises (WFP 31/07/2023). As at 2 October, 71,600 displaced people in Armenia needed food assistance, including 27,000 in Yerevan, 14,300 in Syunik, 6,600 in Kotayk, 5,800 in Ararat, and 3,900 in Gegharkunik (UNHCR 02/10/2023). The highest food insecurity rate was in Gegharkunik, which was at 39% during the start of 2023 (WFP 31/07/2023). Armenian towns receiving significant numbers of displaced ethnic Armenians, including Gegharkunik, may struggle to meet the food needs of both host communities and refugees.

Protection

Family separation is a major concern for the displaced population in Armenia (ICRC 22/09/2023). Aid workers in refugee reception centres on the Armenian borders have set up family-tracing services to re-establish family contacts and reduce cases of family separation and unaccompanied minors (UN 29/09/2023). Many people on the move find initial shelter in crowded hostels in transit towns (The Guardian 02/10/2023). Children, as well as women and girls, staying in overcrowded conditions can face protection risks, such as exploitation and abuse.

Education

Approximately 31% of the 100,000 people arriving in Armenia from Nagorno-Karabakh are children (UNHCR 03/10/2023 a). As at 3 October, about 4,100 children from Nagorno-Karabakh had enrolled in Armenian public schools to continue their education (NEWS.am 04/10/2023; France 24 03/10/2023). Armenian government officials have stated that to ensure the resumption of schooling for displaced children, the loss of documents will not pose a barrier to their enrolment. The Armenian Government has proposed training and capacity-building programmes to strengthen the ability of Armenian teachers to integrate the learning of displaced children into the Armenian curriculum (ARKA 03/10/2023).

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh

Self-proclaimed Azerbaijani environmental activists started blocking the Lachin corridor on 12 December 2022, which resulted in a shortage of essential supplies for the population of Nagorno-Karabakh (EU Parliament 09/02/2023). The blockade had been in place until Azerbaijan's takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh, lasting 10 months. The activists claimed that the blockade was to protest the mining activities exploiting the environment in the region (Reuters 15/12/2022; Eurasianet 01/05/2023). The blockade severely affected access to financial resources and the overall health situation of the people living in Nagorno-Karabakh. This means that the refugees arriving in Armenia were already experiencing high humanitarian needs.

Food supply disruptions because of the blockade resulted in food stocks in Nagorno-Karabakh running low (AI 29/09/2023). During the blockade, malnutrition cases soared, especially among children, as the population could not access food or restock their dwindling food supplies (CNN 26/09/2023; Gale et al. 28/09/2023).

The blockade also worsened an already distressed health sector following periodic escalations of hostilities in the region (Gale et al. 28/09/2023). The blockade resulted in malnutrition and a collapsed health infrastructure, leading to miscarriages for pregnant women (Gale et al. 28/09/2023; Armenpress 29/08/2023). Sexual reproductive needs and services were also limited, exposing women to protection concerns (WHO 01/10/2023). At the same time, people with conflict-inflicted wounds and injuries were at risk of not accessing proper health services because of limited medical supplies.

The blockade aimed to stop the mining activities in the enclave, which provided Nagorno-Karabakh its primary source of revenue, and restrict access to the markets that catered to these activities. This directly affected those with mining-related livelihoods (RFE/RL 28/12/2022). As at 6 February, the blockade had affected 5,100 jobs in Nagorno-Karabakh (JAMnews 06/02/2023).

Winter season

The winter season in Armenia starts in December. Given limited shelter options and essential NFIs, such as blankets and boots for warmth, the refugees will likely be exposed to the harsh elements of the season (DW 26/09/2023).

RESPONSE CAPACITY

On 1 October, a UN mission was able to access Nagorno-Karabakh for the first time in 30 years to identify the humanitarian needs of those remaining in the region (UN 02/10/2023 c; The Guardian 02/10/2023).

The influx of refugees entering Armenia from Nagorno-Karabakh has overwhelmed the response of the Armenian Government and local organisations (France 24 28/09/2023; BBC 21/09/2023). To coordinate and streamline assistance, the Armenian Government has set up a humanitarian assistance framework in collaboration with local and international NGOs and UN agencies (IFRC 30/09/2023; WHO 01/10/2023; UNHCR 03/10/2023 a). As at 3 October, UNHCR, in collaboration with the Armenian Government, was conducting a joint needs assessment to determine the needs of and response capacity for refugees in Armenia before launching an appeal (UNHCR 03/10/2023 a). Besides the humanitarian response, donors from several countries and organisations, such as USAID, Canada, the UK, and Norway, had pledged to fund the relief efforts within different sectors in Armenia as at 2 October (USAID 26/09/2023; Govt. Canada 28/09/2023; Govt. Norway 02/10/2023).