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Armenia 2020

Military conflict with Azerbaijan, in which both sides committed war crimes and carried out indiscriminate attacks in populated areas, resulted in numerous civilian deaths, injuries and displacement. Freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly were restricted by the state of emergency introduced to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, and by martial law declared because of the conflict. Environmental concerns remained regarding the Amulsar gold mine, amid demonstrations which saw dozens of peaceful protesters arrested and fined.

Background

On 27 September, heavy fighting erupted between Azerbaijan and Armenia and Armenian-supported forces in Azerbaijan's break-away region of Nagorno-Karabakh. On 9 November, under a Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement, Armenia conceded most of the Azerbaijani territory it had previously occupied. The regional capital of Stepanakert/Khankendi and parts of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region remained under the control of the Armenia-backed de facto authorities, dependent for protection on Russian peacekeepers. The defeat caused political unrest and calls for the Prime Minister's resignation, plunging the country into a political crisis. Twelve opposition figures were arrested on 12 November for their role in violent unrest that saw the Prime Minister's residence raided and the parliamentary speaker hospitalized after he was severely beaten by an angry mob.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, at the height of the conflict, some 90,000 ethnic Armenians fled the fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh for Armenia, a displacement which worsened the already dire effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Promised judicial and anti-corruption reforms stalled, in part due to their fragmented nature and the inability to sustain institutional change. Reforms were also impacted by the conflict and the pandemic, both of which ravaged the economy and the health care system. Hospitals and the health care sector remained overwhelmed. They struggled to provide care to a rising number of patients during the pandemic and warfare. The government provided limited financial aid to those who lost jobs and to families with young children.

Indiscriminate attacks

Both sides of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh used heavy explosive weapons with wide-area effects in densely populated civilian areas, including ballistic missiles and notoriously inaccurate rocket artillery salvos, causing civilian deaths, injuries and widespread damage to civilian areas. Verified evidence indicated that both sides used cluster munitions, which is banned under international humanitarian law, including in the attack on Stepanakert/Khankendi in Nagorno-Karabakh region on 4 October, and on the city of Barda in an area under Azerbaijan government control, on 28 October (see Azerbaijan entry).¹

War crimes

War crimes were committed by Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. Several verified videos depicted the mistreatment of prisoners of war and other captives, and desecration of the dead bodies of enemy soldiers by the Armenian side. This included a video showing the murder of an Azerbaijani border guard who had his throat cut.²

Freedoms of expression and assembly

The rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly were restricted throughout the year, firstly as a result of a state emergency imposed from March to September in response to COVID-19, and then on account of martial law imposed from September until the end of the year in response to hostilities with Azerbaijan.

Under the state of emergency the government, among other things, prohibited public gatherings of more than 20 people and the publishing of “unofficial information” about pandemic-related issues. The authorities forced 20 media outlets to amend or delete information that officials deemed as “conducive to spreading panic”. The restrictions on the media were lifted in April, following harsh criticism by local and international rights groups.

Martial law placed renewed restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and assembly. On 9 October, Parliament approved a bill banning dissemination of “unofficial information” on the conflict and national security matters, and any public criticism of military actions and statements by government officials. Martial law restrictions on freedom of peaceful assembly were invoked in November, after the ceasefire was reached, to ban the anti-government demonstrations demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister.

Environmental degradation

In April, the government proposed legislative amendments which would allow it to withhold information that could “negatively affect the environment.” Environmental NGOs raised concerns that the government was seeking to reduce transparency over environmental issues to benefit mining interests at the expense of local communities. This was against the backdrop of ongoing tensions over the Amulsar gold mine in southern Armenia.

Local residents had been blocking the access to the Amulsar mine since 2018, protesting that it posed a threat to the environment and their livelihoods. On 4 August, hundreds of activists gathered at the Amulsar mining site, after the company’s new security personnel had forcibly removed the local residents who were blocking the mine’s access. On 5 August, police arrested 12 people following a violent confrontation with security personnel. In the capital Yerevan, police broke up simultaneous protests in support of environmental activists, detaining dozens of peaceful protesters. All those detained in Amulsar and Yerevan were issued with administrative fines for disobeying police and released.

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1. [Armenia/Azerbaijan: First confirmed use of cluster munitions by Armenia ‘cruel and reckless’ \(News story, 29 October\)](#)
 2. [Armenia/Azerbaijan: Decapitation and war crimes in gruesome videos must be urgently investigated \(News story, 10 December\)](#)

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