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There was no accountability for violations committed during the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and its aftermath. Military hostilities negatively impacted the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights. Most Azerbaijanis displaced during that conflict returned, but ethnic Azerbaijanis displaced from within and near Nagorno-Karabakh during the 1990s did not. Persecution and harassment of government critics continued. Peaceful protests were violently broken up. Arbitrary restrictions continued to cripple the work of human rights defenders and NGOs. Gender-based violence and torture and other ill-treatment remained widespread.

Background

International revelations of abusive surveillance and corruption implicated the Azerbaijani authorities. In July, a collaborative investigation with journalists, media organizations and others exposed the Azerbaijani authorities as spying on hundreds of local activists and journalists by using the NSO Group's Pegasus spyware. In October, another investigation led by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists – the Pandora papers – found that the president's family and their close associates had been secretly involved in property deals worth US\$700 million in Britain using offshore companies.

Azerbaijan rolled out Covid-19 vaccines in January. In September, proof of vaccination became mandatory to access most indoor public places. As of December, 50% of the country's population had been vaccinated with one dose of the coronavirus vaccine and 45% had received two.

Violations of international humanitarian law

No substantive progress was made in investigating war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law during the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and in its immediate aftermath or in bringing suspected perpetrators to justice.¹

Over 100 people were reported killed and injured by mines planted by Armenian forces in territories where they had ceded control to Azerbaijan. By the end of the year Azerbaijan had reportedly handed over 60 captives to Armenia, some in exchange for minefield maps in the conflict affected areas, including Agdam, Fizuli and Zangilan districts. The exact number of people remaining in captivity in Azerbaijan at the end of the year was unknown. In its September report the Council of Europe raised concerns that dozens of captives continued to be held in inhumane conditions and subjected to speedy, unfair trials, while the fate and whereabouts of around 30 Armenian captives remained unknown amid allegations of their enforced disappearance and possible killing.

Economic, social and cultural rights

In November, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) noted “reports of economic, social and cultural rights violations, in the context of armed hostilities involving [Azerbaijan's] military forces” in 2020 in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. These included the destruction of residential, educational, cultural and religious buildings. The Committee called on Azerbaijan to effectively investigate all violations reported in the context of military hostilities and provide access to remedies for victims.

Internally displaced people's rights

The majority of the 40,000 Azeri civilians displaced to government-held territory during the 2020 conflict returned to their homes. However, conditions remained inadequate for the safe and dignified return of over 650,000 people displaced since the 1990s because of mines, destruction of infrastructure and lost livelihoods.

Freedom of expression and assembly

Peaceful protests over both political and social issues continued to be broken up by police using unnecessary and excessive force, while peaceful protesters faced arbitrary administrative and criminal charges.

On 8 March in the capital, Baku, police detained 20 women activists attempting to hold a peaceful march to mark International Women’s Day. They were taken to the police station and forced to sign “explanatory statements” before being released.

On 1 and 15 December, also in Baku, police violently broke up peaceful rallies demanding the release of unfairly imprisoned opposition activist Saleh Rustamli. Police used excessive force against protesters arrested at the 1 December rally, including opposition activist Tofiq Yagoubli, who was hospitalized with serious injuries. Five of the protesters detained on 1 December were given up to 30 days’ administrative detention, the rest were released.

In March, 625 prisoners, including 38 people considered by local human rights groups to be detained for political reasons, were freed by presidential pardon. Politically motivated persecution and harassment of government critics continued unabated, however, and many of its victims remained imprisoned.

Government critic Huseyn Abdullayev remained in prison, in spite of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention regarding his deprivation of liberty as arbitrary and UN human rights experts demanding his immediate release. In October, opposition activist Niyameddin Ahmedov was sentenced to 13 years’ imprisonment for sedition and financing terrorism on apparently politically motivated charges.

In March, bloggers Elchin Gasanzade and Ibragim Salamov were convicted of defamation and sentenced to eight months’ imprisonment; and in January another blogger, Sadar Askerov, was detained, beaten and released after being forced to apologize for a post criticizing local authorities.

Freedom of association

Excessive restrictions both in law and practice continued to hinder the work of human rights defenders and NGOs. In November, the UN Committee for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recommended that Azerbaijan “repeal any legal provisions that unduly restrict the activities of non-governmental organizations”.

In May, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled that Azerbaijan had arbitrarily denied registration to 25 NGOs in violation of the right to freedom of association (*Mehman Aliyev and others v. Azerbaijan and Abdullayev and others v. Azerbaijan*). In October, another ECtHR ruling against Azerbaijan found that the authorities had frozen bank accounts and imposed travel bans to paralyse an NGO’s human rights work (*Democracy and Human Rights Resource Centre and Mustafayev v. Azerbaijan*).

Gender-based violence

Women’s rights activists, women journalists and women associated with the political opposition were blackmailed and subjected to degrading gender-specific smear campaigns after their social media accounts were hacked and private information including photos and videos were published online.²

In November, the CESCR raised concerns about the high incidence of gender-based violence against women and the very low rate of reporting, particularly of domestic violence, and the limited availability of shelters and support services for survivors. Despite continuing demands by local women’s groups the authorities made no progress in signing or ratifying the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), while the welcome given by pro-government media to neighbouring Turkey’s withdrawal from the treaty undermined the process further.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Reports of torture and other ill-treatment remained widespread. Allegations that Azerbaijani forces subjected captured Armenians to torture or other ill-treatment either when they were captured, during their transfer or while in custody were not effectively investigated.

1. [*Armenia-Azerbaijan: In the Line of Fire: Civilian Casualties from Unlawful Strikes in the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict Over Nagorno-Karabakh* \(Index: EUR 55/3502/2021\), 14 January](#)
2. [*Azerbaijan: Gender-Based Reprisals Against Women Must Stop* \(Index: EUR 55/4103/2021\), 12 May](#)

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