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The State of the World's Human Rights; Azerbaijan 2023

Background

On 19 September, Azerbaijan launched a major military offensive to disarm and disband the de facto authorities in the breakaway territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Within hours its forces had regained control over the whole region, and within a few days in September and October more than 100,000 people – almost all of Nagorno-Karabakh's ethnic Armenian population – had fled to Armenia.¹ Those displaced faced economic hardships and uncertainty as no significant progress had been made by Azerbaijan to ensure their right to return in safety and dignity by year's end (see Armenia entry).

Azerbaijani authorities promised amnesty to those who had fought for the de facto authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh, except alleged perpetrators of war crimes. Several of Nagorno-Karabakh's ethnic Armenian leaders were arrested and charged with war crimes as they tried to leave the region for Armenia. In December, Azerbaijan freed 32 Armenian prisoners of war after agreeing to work towards a peace deal with Armenia. The agreement also paved the way for Azerbaijan to host COP29, the global climate summit to be held in November 2024.

The authorities used the military victory to further cement their rule and entrench their clampdown on dissent.

Azerbaijan's human rights record was reviewed in the UN Human Rights Council's UPR in November.²

Violations of international humanitarian law

For nine months prior to the military offensive in September, Azerbaijan's blockade of the Lachin corridor, a road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, caused critical shortages of basic necessities including food, medicines and fuel, and a humanitarian crisis in the breakaway region. In February, the International Court of Justice ordered "unimpeded movement" in both directions, but this was ignored. Azerbaijani authorities insisted that Nagorno-Karabakh be supplied from territory controlled by Azerbaijan or that supplies from Armenia be subjected to thorough inspections, which the Armenian side rejected.³

No substantive progress was reported in investigating alleged war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law in previous years, including disproportionate and indiscriminate attacks by Azerbaijani military forces as well as credible evidence of violence, including killings, of civilians and prisoners of war by Azerbaijani forces. Impunity for these crimes continued to underline ongoing concerns over the Azerbaijani authorities' commitment to ensure protection of civilians in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Freedom of expression and association

Restrictive NGO legislation continued to impose barriers such as arbitrary denial of registration and restrictions over securing funding for human rights groups.

The media remained severely restricted. Government critics, journalists, media representatives and human rights defenders faced increased instances of violence, harassment and arbitrary arrests. Azerbaijani human rights organizations reported that the number of individuals jailed under politically motivated charges had doubled compared with the previous year, to more than 230 people.

A new restrictive media law adopted in 2022 required media outlets to register with the authorities. From November, the Media Development Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan was reported to have begun legal action to close independent media entities that had been denied registration on arbitrary grounds.

Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu, an opposition activist, remained imprisoned since his detention in December 2022 on politically motivated charges. In March, he ended a hunger strike shortly after intimate photographs, videos and conversations with women were leaked from his social media accounts.

Gubad Ibadoghlu, a renowned academic and anti-corruption activist, was arbitrarily arrested by plain-clothes police officers on 23 July in the capital, Baku, on fabricated charges of “religious extremism” and “acquiring or selling counterfeit money”. He was detained together with his wife (who was later released) shortly after helping set up a foundation aimed at benefiting students by seeking funding from assets confiscated under anti-corruption legislation. Gubad Ibadoghlu’s health deteriorated due to prison conditions and lack of adequate healthcare.⁴

More than a dozen activists were reportedly detained under administrative proceedings in September and October for criticizing the government and its military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh. Five men were arrested for posting anti-war content on social media. Three others – Nurlan Gahramanli, Emin Ibrahimov and Nemet Abbasov – were given 30 days’ administrative detention for purportedly disseminating harmful information and disobeying the police. Afiaddin Mammadov, a trade union leader, was arrested on fabricated charges of physical assault carrying up to five years in prison and remained in pretrial detention at year’s end.

In November and December, ahead of snap presidential elections expected in February 2024, police arrested at least 13 people on charges that appeared to be fabricated in retaliation for their criticism of the authorities. Prominent opposition politician Tofiq Yagublu was arrested for allegedly falsifying documents. Abzas Media director Ulvi Hasanli, his colleagues Sevinj Vagifgizi, Nargiz Absalamova and Mahammad Kekalov, and investigative journalist Hafiz Babali were jailed on charges of smuggling after Abzas Media reported allegations of government corruption. Independent journalists Teymur Karimov, Ibrahim Humbatov, Arshad Ibrahimov, Aziz Orujov and Rufat Muradli, as well as activists Mohyaddin Orujov and Ilhamiz Guliyev, were arrested on charges ranging from illegal construction to possession of drugs and extortion.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

The authorities continued to arbitrarily restrict the right to peaceful assembly. On 20 June police violently broke up a peaceful environmental protest in the village of Söyüdlü, Gadabay district, by local activists demonstrating against the planned expansion of a gold mine. Footage showed police beating protesters with truncheons and spraying a chemical irritant directly into the faces of several women protesters. Approximately 10 people were injured and a dozen were temporarily detained during the protest and its aftermath. This included at least three journalists briefly detained and beaten by the police while covering the protests and several activists arrested following the protests for their critical social media posts. Police also reportedly blocked access to Söyüdlü from 22 June for at least three weeks, allowing only residents and pro-government media outlets to enter.

Gender-based violence

Women continued to face various forms of gender-based violence, including being targeted as instruments of political revenge.

Local women activists raised concerns about the safety and security of several women whose intimate photographs, videos and messages were leaked from the private accounts of arrested opposition activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu (see above, Freedom of expression and association). The activists accused the government of being behind the leaks and making those women targets of violence, including from their own families, by releasing their names, images and, in one case, their home address. The investigation into the alleged cybercrime was ongoing at the end of the year.