



Humanitarian
Aid Relief Trust

Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh Visit Report

7th– 14th August 2017



Welcome at The Lady Cox Rehabilitation Centre



Photograph from the memorial for Fallen Soldiers titled 'We Want Peace'

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Executive Summary

Aspects of the situation regarding Human Rights, military offences and the need for international monitors

- Both The Republic of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (also known as Artsakh) are taking steps to strengthen their democratic institutions, and the definition and protection of human rights in their constitutions.
- Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh are concerned about the current global challenges relating to terrorism including Islamic State, and their vulnerable position in the South Caucasus region.
- There is widespread concern over the escalation of Azerbaijan's military arsenal.
- There are extensive reports of the increasing propaganda in Azerbaijan to create "armenophobia" including anti-Armenian content in school text books and negative social media.
- Political and human rights representatives in Nagorno-Karabakh highlight the urgent need for more international attention, including the presence of international monitors, to document first-hand evidence of aggression and to deter Azerbaijan from further military offences and perpetration of atrocities.
- The spirit of the people in Nagorno-Karabakh is positive as they continue to rebuild their bomb-damaged towns and villages, often with impressive architecture style.

Humanitarian Initiatives

- The Government of Nagorno-Karabakh are making some of the newly built high-quality accommodation available for those suffering the legacy of war and people living with disabilities.
- The Lady Cox Rehabilitation Centre continues to expand the therapeutic repertoire for people with disabilities ranging from the new-born to the elderly. 1000 patients receive care annually including physiotherapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy and other therapies including music, art and sport.
- A new department for the treatment of patients with autism aged 2 – 16 has opened this year.
- The Centre now supports Regional Specialist Therapists who care locally for patients who cannot travel to Stepanakert enabling 450 more patients to receive treatment.
- The care provided by the Centre also helps to reduce the legacy of stigma associated with people with disabilities which was wide-spread throughout the Soviet Union.
- Constraints in funding and space limit the provision of care for people with disabilities to only 10% of those who could benefit from the services.

Recommendations

- The international community:
 - a) to become more actively engaged in monitoring the military and human rights situations in Nagorno-Karabakh to promote good practice and to serve as a deterrent to further military aggression.
 - b) to encourage internationally respected human rights organisations to work in Nagorno-Karabakh.
 - c) to support the proposed appointment of additional OSCE monitors.
 - d) to investigate reports of the promotion of Armenophobia in Azerbaijan including the anti-Armenian contents of school text books.
- The provision of more financial resources for the Rehabilitation Centre to enable more widespread care for people with disabilities currently unable to access services.

Purpose of Visit

A delegation from HART visited The Republic of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh between the 7th and 14th August 2017 to meet members of the Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh Assemblies (Parliaments) to discuss achievements and problems; and to visit HART's partner Vardan Tadesvovyan, together with the staff and patients of The Lady Cox Rehabilitation Centre.

The delegation included Dr. 'Sasa' (Dr Maung Taing San), one of HART's partners based in Burma (Myanmar). Dr. Sasa trained as a medical doctor in Armenia and has since returned to Burma to train 1000 Community Health Workers who provide healthcare to over 500 villages and 500,000 people living in remote areas of Chin and Rakhine States. This initiative saves the lives of 8 out of 10 people who would previously have died as a result of no available healthcare.

During the visit, discussions were initiated between Dr. Sasa and Vardan Tadesvosyan, the Rehabilitation Centre Director, to consider the possibility of introducing to Burma Vardan's internationally respected model of care for people with disabilities. We hope that Vardan will be able to visit Burma for this purpose; in time a programme could be developed which would be widely applicable in different regions.

Background Context

Nagorno-Karabakh is a historically Armenian land but now a disputed territory since Stalin located it as an oblast in Azerbaijan without considering the will on the people of Nagorno-Karabakh, who never came to terms with that imposed reality and wanted to restore historical justice. In 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR), Azerbaijan initiated full-scale war resulting in the deaths of about 30,000 people¹ until a ceasefire was brokered by Russia in 1994. Since this time, Nagorno-Karabakh has struggled for international recognition of Statehood and Azerbaijan has continued to argue the case of its territorial integrity.



Map of Nagorno-Karabakh from GlobalSecurity.org

From time to time there have been relatively minor violations of the ceasefire but in April 2016 Nagorno-Karabakh suffered an Azeri attack which resulted in an alleged death toll of 350² (soldiers and civilians).

¹ The Economist, 'A Frozen Conflict Explodes', 9th April 2016, <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21696563-after-facing-decades-armenia-and-azerbaijan-start-shooting-frozen-conflict-explodes>

² Chatham House, 'The Nagorny Karabakh Conflict: Defaulting to War', July 2016 <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/NK%20paper%2024082016%20WEB.pdf>

Tensions escalated, with Azerbaijan threatening a major scale attack on the country's capital Stepanakert – which is home to some 50,000 people - until after nearly four days of fighting a ceasefire was restored by both sides. However, tensions still remain high in the disputed region with no progress towards a negotiated peace.

After the 1994 ceasefire, the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was established to negotiate a peace agreement. According to the decision of the Budapest summit the negotiations were conducted between three sides: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh. However, since 1999 the process of the Azerbaijani-Karabakh conflict resolution has been carried out through the meetings of presidents and other official representatives of Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as by means of shuttle visits of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-chairs to Stepanakert, Yerevan and Baku. The Co-chairs of the group Russia, France and the U.S, have not managed to ease hostilities. In May 2017, it was announced that the OSCE office in Yerevan would be closing due to non-renewal of the mandate.³

Main Issues

We were privileged to meet politicians from Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh and to discuss their analyses of the latest developments in the conflict between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh.

In chronological order, we met:

- *Ara Babloyan, President of the National Assembly of Armenia*
- *Karen Karapetyan, Prime Minister of Armenia*
- *Ashot Ghouljian, President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Artsakh*
- *Karine Atayan, Minister of Healthcare for Artsakh*
- *Karen Mirzoyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs for Artsakh*
- *Ruben Melikyan, Ombudsman of Artsakh*

Commitment to Democracy and Human Rights

Both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh are committed to promoting democracy and human rights and both have democratically elected National Assemblies. Nagorno-Karabakh recently held a referendum promoting changes starting from September 2017. The new constitution includes 20 articles relating to human rights including children's rights for the first time. Progress in the development of democratic institutions will continue to be assisted and informed by the discussions which are held with other democratic governments.

³ United States Mission to the OSCE, 4 May 2017 <http://www.osce.org/permanent-council/320881?download=true>



HART delegation meeting Ashot Ghouljian, the President of the National Assembly of Artsakh

The Military Threat from Azerbaijan

In April 2016, the outbreak of war lasted only four days with the 1994 ceasefire being re-instated on the 5th of April. This was the most wide-scale military action that Azerbaijan carried out since the establishment of the 1994 ceasefire. The attack on defenceless civilian villages in addition to army bases was presumably intended to create fear amongst the civilian population⁴. However, there is a reported increased public spirit of determination and optimism, because the small army of Nagorno-Karabakh was able to withstand the well-planned attack from Azerbaijan who possessed sophisticated military weapons and highly trained, apparently ‘Special Forces’ soldiers.

However, there is concern that Azerbaijan has been increasing their military capacity and buying more arms⁵, suggesting they are preparing for war rather than peace. Azerbaijan is a richer and larger country and therefore the Nagorno-Karabakh military and propaganda resources are unequal.

There are also concerns over the fragility of this volatile region and fear that the escalation of ISIS and other terrorist groups elsewhere could cause the international community to focus on their own problems, leaving Nagorno-Karabakh vulnerable to another attack.

Therefore, it will be important for OSCE to increase the number of monitors to be able to discharge their duties effectively, and close to the frontline, to help to deter future attacks, and to gather evidence of any aggression. There have been requests to increase the number of monitors; however it is possible this will only be a token increase.



A small section of photos of the soldiers killed in the war at the Memorial for Fallen Soldiers

⁴ Artsakh Ombudsman’s Second Interim Report on Atrocities Committed by Azerbaijan During the 2016 April War, 2016

http://www.ombudsnkr.am/en/docs/Report_PUBLIC.pdf

⁵ The Jerusalem Post, IRANIAN ADVERSARY REVEALS IT BOUGHT \$5 BILLION OF WEAPONS FROM ISRAEL, 13 December 2016,

<http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Israel-looking-to-sell-missile-defense-systems-to-Azerbaijan-475242>

Armenophobia – Negative Propaganda generated by Azerbaijan

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, Azerbaijan has encouraged an anti-Armenian sentiment⁶ which eventually escalated into military conflict from 1991 to 1994, and again in April 2016. Hostile, negative propaganda is currently widespread in Azerbaijan causing fears that another conflict could escalate.

Rising levels of hatred have been fuelled by the media who glorify those committing war crimes against Armenians. Social media platforms make it easier for Azeri civilians and soldiers to share negative information perpetuating levels of hatred towards Armenians, especially for the younger generation. For example, after the 2016 war, Azeris posted the decapitated head of an Armenian soldier on social media – since removed by Azeri media but it had already been widely seen and has been archived by the Nagorno-Karabakh Ombudsman.

Evidence has also been found in school texts books showing negative stereotypes of Armenians, instilling Armenophobia from a young age. In contrast, authorities in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh are careful to use language which promotes peace and reconciliation. A report from the Ombudsman will be available soon.

Calls for International Involvement

There are many requests for the international community to be present in Nagorno-Karabakh to enable objective and accurate information to be disseminated, rather than the biased articles issued by Azerbaijan. Also, with more officers and monitors in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan may be deterred from escalating the aggression.

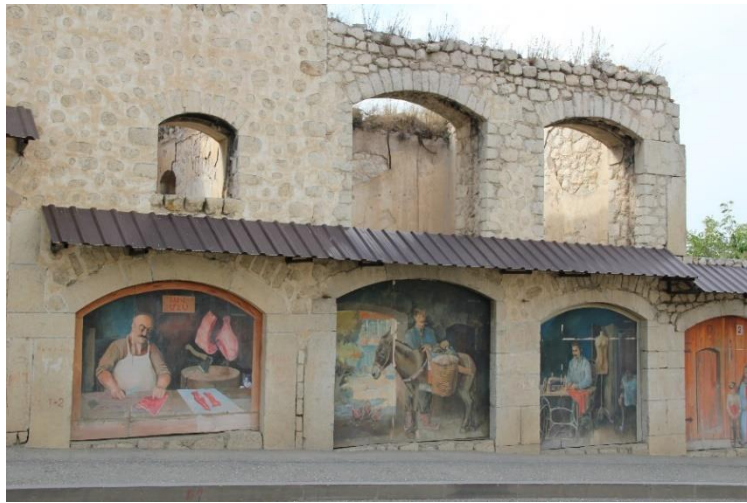
A report published by the Ombudsman of Artsakh⁷, documents atrocities perpetrated by Azeris on Armenian soldiers and civilians on the first day of the war in April 2016: of the 31 people under their control, 90% suffered either torture, execution and/or mutilation. 3 of the soldiers captured were beheaded, 1 of whom was decapitated in a way similar to that recorded in Islamic State videos. The report outlines the measured and planned attack of the Azeris on Armenian forces and civilians, clearly showing it was they who broke the ceasefire agreement. Furthermore, the atrocities committed on prisoners is a blatant violation of the International Humanitarian Law and yet there has been no action to hold the Azerbaijan military to account.

There is very little current involvement from the international community in Nagorno-Karabakh. With the exception of the highly valued work of The HALO Trust and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), support comes mainly from Armenian Diaspora and a few smaller human rights organisations. Many other NGOs and human rights organisations are deterred by Azerbaijan's intimidating threats and "blacklist". Those who are on the "blacklist" are considered 'persona non grata' and restricted from entering Azerbaijan.⁸ This may be a reason why key human rights organisations avoid going to Karabakh in order to maintain access to Azerbaijan where there are serious violations of human rights.

⁶ European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 'Report on Azerbaijan' 28 June 2002, https://web.archive.org/web/20130921073055/http://hudoc.fcnm.coe.int/XML/Ecri/ENGLISH/Cycle_02/02_CbC_eng/02-cbc-azerbaijan-eng.pdf

⁷ Artsakh Ombudsman's Second Interim Report, 'Atrocities Committed by Azerbaijan During the 2016 April War', 2016
⁸ Foreign Policy News, 'Black list for Black Garden', 19 February 2017 <http://foreignpolicynews.org/2017/02/19/black-list-black-garden/>

Positively, Nagorno-Karabakh personnel are beginning to be invited to debates and conferences in their own right; however they face constant opposition from Azerbaijan. There is also a welcome increase of many foreign tourists, with a growing number from the Far East.



Art among the ruins - Shushi

The Lady Cox Rehabilitation Centre

The Soviet Union was known for its policies of social exclusion and stigmatisation of people with disabilities. In the aftermath of the conflict in the early 1990s, Nagorno-Karabakh had a considerable number of people with disabilities, including those injured in the war. Our local partner Vardan has been working tirelessly to eradicate traditional stigmas.

Achievements and Limitations

- The Centre continues to provide care for 1000 patients annually and has increased the number of staff to 60.
- An additional 450 patients are treated by regional specialists who can provide care locally without the need to travel to Stepanakert.
- A new department for the treatment of patients with autism aged two to sixteen has opened this year. The children receive high-quality care with a ratio of one staff member per two patients.
- A new bus accessible for people with disabilities to transport patients for therapeutic and recreational activities.
- The care provided by the Centre also helps to reduce the legacy of stigma associated with people with disabilities.



Vardan in the new Autism Department. The model kitchen is used to teach patients everyday activities and safety precautions.

The main constraint in Vardan's work is that the Centre has reached its full capacity. Although the Centre currently cares for 1000 patients annually, this represents only 10% of those in Nagorno-Karabakh who actually have need of the therapies. The expansion of regional nurse specialists who are able to care for additional patients in other areas of Nagorno-Karabakh increases the numbers receiving care. However Vardan is ambitious to reach more people in need.

With more funding, Vardan would like to open an additional Centre on the outskirts of Stepanakert where patients would be able to benefit from more outdoor space and activities. Another aim of the new Centre would be to provide basic training for more families of people with disabilities so that care could be given at home. Vardan estimates this will allow the project to care for an additional 5% of the population.

HART is arranging for Vardan to come to the UK this October to visit Rehabilitations Centres in order to obtain ideas of current 'best practice'. This will act as a basis for the development of his proposed new Centre in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Conclusion

Respecting the wish of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh to live in their ancestral homeland is of utmost importance. We saw evidence of the commitment of both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh to developing the principles and policies of democracy and civil society, including promoting the human rights of citizens. In regards to the Republic of Artsakh, they continue to strengthen democratic institutions and protect human rights without outside help. While teetering on the edge between regional peace and conflict, it is encouraging to learn that they are continuing to engage in international discussions regarding political and social reforms.

Nagorno-Karabakh cannot match the military capacity or the money spent on propaganda in Azerbaijan and is vulnerable to renewed military offences. There is therefore a need for involvement of more international organisations to monitor developments and deter further potential aggression by Azerbaijan. As the OSCE office is closing in Yerevan, the lack of presence could be an incentive for

Azerbaijan to renew hostilities, which makes it even more imperative for more monitors to be deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh.

There is also a need for more humanitarian and other international organisations to support the people of Nagorno-Karabakh still suffering from the effects of conflict and for financial assistance for Vardan's Rehabilitation Centre, which is internationally recognised as a Centre of Excellence, receiving professional visitors from many other countries.

Appreciation and Gratitude

We wish to record our appreciation and gratitude to all our hosts while we were in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh who gave so generously of their time and famous Armenian hospitality, including:

Ara Babloyan, President of the National Assembly of Armenia;
Karen Karapetyan, Prime Minister of Armenia;
Ashot Ghouljian, President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Artsakh;
Karine Atayan, Minister of Healthcare for Artsakh;
Karen Mirzoyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs for Artsakh;
Ruben Melikyan, Ombudsman of Artsakh;
Zori Balayan;
Vardan Tadevosyan;
Artemis Gregorian;
Aslan Grigorian;
Hayk Petrosian.

We would also like to thank supporters of The Lady Cox Rehabilitation Centre including Jorge Vartparonian, the Armenian community in Australia and the Ahmanson family in the USA.