

A YEAR AFTER UNLEASHING WAR CRIMES AGAINST INDIGENOUS ARMENIANS, AZERBAIJAN'S THREATS AND VIOLATIONS CONTINUE

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A year ago today—on September 27, 2020—The Republic of Azerbaijan, with Turkey's full military support and over 1,000 trafficked [Syrian jihadist mercenaries](#), launched a war against the indigenous Armenians in the disputed territories of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh). Throughout the [44-day](#) war, Azerbaijan's indiscriminate use of cluster munitions, drones, and artillery rockets included [phosphorous bombs](#) which scorched forests causing severe burns among soldiers and civilians.

Among other [heinous war crimes](#), the Azeri military posted social media videos boasting [beheadings](#) and torture of captured Armenian civilians and military. A strong-arm trilateral agreement on November 10, 2020, negotiated between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, ended the war and stationed 2,000 Russian peacekeeping troops in Artsakh.

The spoils of the war left nearly two-thirds of the indigenous Armenian lands in Artsakh occupied by Azerbaijan. With over 5,000 Armenians killed, 110,000 displaced, 10,000 fighters wounded and 200 [POWs](#) detained [illegally](#) in Azerbaijan prisons and tortured—there are still hundreds of unaccounted Armenian MIAs.

A year later, the Azeri [assaults](#) on the Armenian population continue. In the occupied Hadrut Region, Azeri soldiers [desecrated](#) Armenian cemeteries. The French Journalist, [J-Christophe Buisson](#) tweeted about the masked armed Azeri soldiers who stopped the Artsakh Armenian youth soccer team bus on its way to Armenia for a soccer match. Using a dagger to scrape off the Artsakh flag from the surface of the bus, the soldiers inspected the war-traumatized children's phones, stating Nagorno-Karabakh is part of Azerbaijan.

Last month during a [CNN Turk](#) interview, Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev had a warning. "...if Armenian fascism tries to raise its head ever again, we will crush it again. The defeat in the second Karabakh war should be a lesson for them.....It seems that the second Karabakh war has not been a lesson for everyone yet. If this is the case, then we are ready to teach them another lesson."

The U.S. House of Representatives on September 23, passed the Cardenas-Schiff-Sherman amendment demanding Azerbaijan "immediately and unconditionally return all Armenian" POWs and captive civilians. It also called for a report on Azerbaijani war crimes, use of illegal munitions and white phosphorus against Armenian civilians, and an investigation into the use of U.S. technology in Turkish drones that targeted Armenian civilians during the 2020 war.

The Republic of Armenia "instituted proceedings against the Republic of Azerbaijan before the International Court of [Justice](#)," the principal judicial organ of the UN. Earlier this year, Armenia also filed interstate complaints against Turkey with the [European Court of Human Rights](#).

"Human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law were widespread after Artsakh was attacked. Mercenaries and jihadis were deployed from Syria and Libya under Turkey's command. These perpetrators were responsible for horrific crimes, which are ongoing despite the

ceasefire agreement. Columbia University's Artsakh Atrocities Project has been documenting events. We hope that the information we've compiled can be used to hold Turkey and its cohorts accountable for its wanton abuse of civilians, including women and children, as well as cultural crimes," says David L. Phillips, Director of the Program on Peace-building and Rights Institute for the Study of Human Rights, at Columbia University.

While Azerbaijan refutes the legal right to self-determination of the Armenian population of Artsakh, last year's war echoed memories of [September Days](#) 1918 and the systematic extermination of nearly 15,000 Armenians in Nakhichevan and Artsakh. Similar to their brethren Ottoman Turks' occupation of Armenian properties and landmarks during the 1915 [Genocide of 1.5 million Armenians](#), Azerbaijan continues desecrating Artsakh's [churches](#), ancient cemeteries, [sacred cathedrals](#) and historic sites dating back a millennium.

Citing recent [Caucasus Heritage Watch](#) (CHW) report, Hakim Bishara reports in [Hyperallergic](#) how "over a dozen Armenian churches, cemeteries, sacred cross-stones (*Khachkars*), and other cultural properties have either been destroyed, damaged, or threatened by Azerbaijan." Azerbaijan's President Aliyev ordered the [removal](#) of medieval Armenian inscriptions from churches, calling them "fake" and rebranding the sites as "ancient Azerbaijani" landmarks. The 2019 groundbreaking forensic reportage in [Hyperallergic](#) by Sarah Pickman and Simon Maghakyan details Azerbaijan's long history of erasure and destruction of indigenous Armenian sites including "89 medieval churches, 5,840 intricate cross-stones, and 22,000 tombstones."

Well-Paid U.S. PR Agencies, Lobby Groups Ensure Azerbaijan's Cover-Ups

Well-orchestrated PR campaign machinery, constructed in advance of last September's war by high-end U.S. [PR agencies](#) and lobby groups, orchestrated a widespread [misinformation campaign](#) against Armenia, as Azerbaijan carpet bombed Artsakh. Anti-Armenian reports and articles germinated across top media outlets most prominently led by Carlotta Gall, The New York Times' Istanbul bureau chief. International organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch issued pro-Azerbaijan reports accusing Armenia of instigating the war, and then changed their [claims](#). [DataPoint Armenia](#) offered the most comprehensive analysis on the "social media narrative warfare during the war" or "astroturfing" concluding that pro-Armenian social posts had "small effect on international audiences."

While diaspora Armenian communities demanded justice against the Azerbaijan-Turkey alliance, diaspora Turks unleashed [hate crimes](#) defacing Armenian churches, schools and cemeteries. When France sent humanitarian [relief aid](#) to Artsakh, calling for the region's recognition, Azerbaijan's parliament [called](#) for France "to be stripped of its mediation role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to punish the French Senate."

Neither [Azerbaijan](#) nor [Turkey](#) has earned human rights awards in recent years.

Documenting War Crimes Against Erasure

Democracy Today NGO's report "Never Again–44-day war: war crimes and international law" [documented](#) the Azeri/Turkish war crimes during and after the 44-day war and attacks on civil population, children, journalists, members of humanitarian missions, and religious, cultural, and educational institutions and civil property. The report documents Azeri torture and inhumane treatment of civilians and some 200 POWs–filed and referred to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) by the Government of Armenia as a permanent documentation for world history of crimes committed by Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Formed in November 2020, the Center for Truth & Justice ([CFTJ](#)) provides "a voice to victims of human rights violations." The unaffiliated, all-volunteer NGO is run by approximately 25 American-Armenian attorneys, who oversee a law clinic in Armenia and train local law students and young lawyers to collect evidence through witness interviews with survivors of the 44-day war. To date, CFTJ has conducted nearly 150 interviews and trained 100 people in Armenia and Artsakh to obtain testimonial evidence.



CFTJ interviewers complete pre-interview consent and confidentiality forms. Megan Mangassarian, CFTJ

"What CFTJ does is bear witness to the stories of war survivors, create a record of the stories, and secure the records so that no one can ever try to rewrite the stories. In a world of fake news, where the truth constantly gets buried, we believe firsthand testimonies are one of the last few reliable sources of evidence," says Tamara Voskanian, an ethics attorney and one of CFTJ founders, who explains how interview questions are designed to garner evidence to support legal prosecutions. After the interviews conclude, the evidence collected is categorized into potential legal causes of action. CFTJ has already provided evidence to lawyers in several countries who are working on cases in their own jurisdictions.

Since most CFTJ volunteers, both inside and outside Armenia, are women, interviews often present challenging cultural dynamics when the witness is male, and the interviewers are female. In the traditional patriarchal Armenian society, men are often discouraged from opening-up and being vulnerable—critical components of a successful interview—so CFTJ's training guides the law students and lawyers around such complexities. Female interviewers are taught to establish their neutral authority early on and to build trust with their witnesses prior to recording any discussions.



A young Armenian man who was severely burned on his hands and face by a drone during the 2020 Artsakh war is interviewed by CFTJ. Megan Mangassarian, CFTJ

A portion of CFTJ's interviews are with returned prisoners of war (POWs) and their families. Nearly a year after the war's end, Azerbaijan continues to hold nearly 200 Armenian POWs, while publicly admitting to holding fewer than 40. The joint statement to end active hostilities, signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia last November 9, required all captives on both sides to be released. In compliance with the statement, Armenia does not currently hold any Azerbaijani POWs, while Azerbaijan continues to hold Armenian POWs—violating both international law and the joint peace statement.

"The accounts of torture from released POWs interviewed by CFTJ are entirely consistent," Voskanyan says. POWs were subjected to burning of fingers, electric shocks, beatings while blindfolded, humiliated, and beaten repeatedly in the same areas of their bodies so that their injuries

would appear to be old rather than recurring.



CFTJ interviews a witness who was forced to flee her home in Artsakh, losing all her possessions. She and her entire family are now displaced in Armenia. Megan Mangassarian, CFTJ

CFTJ's recent [White Paper](#), presenting the evidence of inhumane treatment and torture of Armenian captives, was sent to select members of U.S. Congress, which Voskanian says provides a basis for conducting congressional hearings into Azerbaijan's violations of human rights. It also urges Congress to sanction and withhold aid from Azerbaijan until they release all Armenian hostages.

According to CFTJ, Azerbaijan is violating international law by prosecuting Armenian POWs in sham trials as during this past summer, when Azerbaijan tried and convicted dozens of Armenian POWs. In some ongoing trials, they deprive Armenian captives of the most basic legal protections while the sentences are arbitrary and excessive, unsupported by any factual evidence but are more of a show.

Returned female POW Maral Najarian spoke to CFTJ after her release from Azerbaijan this March. The Lebanese citizen moved to Artsakh after the Beirut blast, and following the ceasefire agreement, was captured along with her partner, Vicken Euljekjian, and held by Azerbaijan for four months accused of being a "[mercenary](#)" but was not convicted. Euljekjian, however, was tried and convicted in a Baku court in June and is now serving a 20-year prison sentence in what Voskanian calls a travesty of justice.

As the neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan have been at war since before both countries formally broke away from the Soviet Union, the lack of diplomatic relations has created a deep information vacuum following the most recent war, says Voskanian.

Women Enduring War, PTSD And Displacement

With men comprising 45% of Armenia's population, over 10,000 are now disabled veterans, while hundreds suffer from severe burns caused by the white phosphorus used by Azerbaijan. This lays most of the responsibilities of managing displacement and survival primarily on the women.



Nona Khaninyan, whose husband was killed during the Artsakh war, is among the 100 women participating in the GITC free web development courses. Nona Khaninyan

Women comprise [30% of the IT workforce](#) in Armenia while the global average share of women employed in IT is less than 20%. To create high-paying job opportunities for displaced women, the Gyumri Information Technology Center ([GITC](#)) educational foundation is offering free web development courses to 100 female members of the veterans' families. The initiative is supported by U.S.-based Armenian donors, including Fund for Armenian Relief.

"The GITC initiative provides women with skills that they can learn quickly and opens opportunities for building a solid, high-paying IT career with possibilities for flexible remote work that accommodate the women's family and domestic responsibilities," explains Amalya Yeghoyan, Executive Director at Gyumri Information Technologies Center who is negotiating job placement opportunities with the private sector for the beneficiaries of the GITC program.

The International Christian Concern ([ICC](#))'s Artsakh project manager, Claire Evans, says nearly 60,000 Armenians were displaced from Artsakh. Most of the displaced now live in Armenia.

"With the Armenian government's temporary housing about to expire at the end of the year, we expect a major housing crisis at the beginning of 2022, assuming that the government cannot complete its construction of new houses," Evans explains how displaced women from the villages need start up materials as seeds for gardens and livestock, to generate income and improve quality of life in the interim.



A temporary shelter for livestock built by a displaced family near the 13th-century Armenian Apostolic cathedral, Gandzasar monastery in Artsakh. International Christian Concern Their immediate needs are hygienic care, including diapers and washing machines, since there's nowhere to do laundry. Evans cites a displaced woman's case from Hadrut whose husband was "found tortured and hung in their home and her son killed" on the battlefield—she now lives in emergency housing in Armenia's capital city, Yerevan.

"It's impossible for her to ever consider returning home because Hadrut is now fully occupied by the Azeris," says Evans. "With no source of income, she is so traumatized that she struggles to even communicate. She has secured a loan to buy a house but can't afford the full price. We think this is the best long-term option for her."

ICC continues to provide services for the hundreds of displaced individuals among them, an [11-year-old](#) boy and his family eager to return to Artsakh, and the [bride](#) who had to bid farewell to her fallen father right before her wedding. Continuing to monitor [Azerbaijan's ongoing crimes against Armenian captives](#), the ICC's [humanitarian perspective](#) statement urges further investigations into the Artsakh situation, calling on the international humanitarian and religious freedom community for "awareness, assistance, and advocacy." It also calls for humanitarian observations for the remaining Artsakh residents' needs. Azerbaijan and Turkey's "seizure and presumed destruction of personal properties" and personal identification papers for displaced persons, further isolate "the survivors

from humanitarian solutions.

"Family members of the missing, many of whom are essentially kidnapped kids (since many soldiers were teenagers) are living a daily nightmare. As a mother, I feel deep empathy and sorrow for the families of POWs, especially the mothers and young wives," Voskanian says the impact of this war multiplied the pressures on Armenia's women, who were already struggling in a fledgling economy and political instability. While highly educated, women holds few positions of power—as evident in recent elections where of the 15 appointed government ministers, only one was a [woman](#). "One of CFTJ's goals is to expand the role of women in Armenia's legal system, thereby raising their status in society. In working to address and heal the wounds of this war, women in Armenia are carrying the country through these difficult times and preparing it for a brighter future."

There are no comments yet.