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Azerbaijan: Discrimination and segregation compound problems of internal displacement for hundreds of thousands of people

"We are ready to live with the Armenians of Karabakh and we have not forgotten our historical home there. But we won't see peace for at least ten years, that's why we want decent living conditions now."

Ayaz, who was displaced from his home in Nagorny Karabakh and has been living in Goranboy region for 14 years

"I don't need benefits, I'd rather have my compensation and integrate into society here in Baku. The government should stop deceiving me that I'll be able to return."

Elmar, displaced from the province of Kelbajar.

One of the largest populations of internally displaced people per capita in the world faces discrimination, segregation and an uncertain future, according to a new report released by Amnesty International today. Some 600,000 Azerbaijanis have lived in internal displacement for over a decade as a result of the conflict between Armenians and Azeris for Nagorny Karabakh, a territory within Azerbaijan populated mainly by ethnic Armenians, between 1991 and 1994.

Although minimum essential levels of human rights have been provided for by the Azerbaijani government, with international assistance, Amnesty International is concerned that current measures are not adequate to provide for the progressive realization of human rights in a context of long-term displacement.

"By law internally displaced people enjoy the same legal protection and guarantees of their rights as other citizens. In practice, however, there are numerous limitations on their rights to freedom of movement, adequate housing, the fullest attainable level of health care and to work. Taken together, these violations effectively create a series of barriers discriminating against and segregating the internally displaced population," said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

In its report, *Azerbaijan: Displaced then discriminated against -- the plight of the internally displaced population*, Amnesty International outlines a series of practices which in effect discriminate against and segregate the displaced population.

- o Internally displaced people are restricted by the internal residence registration system to a fixed address in order to receive aid and social services, despite the *de jure* abolition of this system in the Azerbaijani Constitution. Residence permits in prosperous urban centres are difficult to obtain without the payment of bribes.
- o New settlements for the internally displaced have been constructed in geographically remote, economically unviable and otherwise unsuitable locations, leading to isolation and segregation.
- o The internally displaced have not been consulted on decision-making processes with direct impact on their lives, for example, the location of new settlements built to house them.
- o The internally displaced are consistently encouraged to see their situation as temporary, discouraging them to seek integration or permanent resettlement in another part of the country.

Internally displaced people suffer from higher rates of poverty compared to the rest of the population and have consequently remained highly dependent on subsidies and aid. The internally displaced population has not benefited from the privatization process in Azerbaijan and is all but excluded from participation in the country's oil-driven economic boom. According to official data published in 2005 the internally displaced show continued dependence on

state benefits as their main source of income: 8.5 per cent compared to less than 0.1 per cent of the rest of the population. Poverty in turn contributes to disproportionately high incidences of anaemia, tuberculosis, malnutrition and mental health problems. Displaced people suffer disproportionately from unemployment and under-employment, compounded by restrictions to their right to move legally around the country in search of employment and by economic isolation in new settlements.

Human rights treaties to which Azerbaijan is a party require the authorities to respect and protect the rights of internally displaced people to life, and an adequate standard of living.

"Although on paper the Azerbaijani government appears willing to allocate resources to the needs of the internally displaced population, these resources are not being used in ways that allow the progressive realization of their human rights. State officials consistently emphasize the 'temporary' nature of social and housing programmes for the displaced. Yet this emphasis is increasingly in conflict with the prolonged nature of displacement," Nicola Duckworth said.

"The right to return to their original homes in conditions of dignity and security is the right of all internally displaced people, and remains a key aspiration of Azerbaijan's displaced population. However, displaced people have the right to make other choices, including to integrate or resettle permanently elsewhere in the country. This right to choose cannot be forfeited."

In order to address the human rights issues of the displaced people, Amnesty International calls on the government of Azerbaijan to:

- o Remove all obstacles to the rights of the displaced population to freedom of movement and choice of residence;
- o Take steps to provide for the right of displaced people to genuinely participate in a process of consultation on issues affecting them;
- o Ensure that the right of the displaced population to an adequate standard of housing is respected in both rural and urban contexts.

Amnesty International calls on the international community to continue to assist the Azerbaijani authorities in this regard.

Background

The conflict over Nagorny Karabakh is one of several minority-majority conflicts contesting sovereignty between former federal units of the Soviet Union. Known in the Soviet Union as the Nagorny Karabakh Autonomous Region, Nagorny Karabakh was populated by a local Armenian majority within Soviet Azerbaijan. With the onset of political liberalization in the late 1980s, the Armenians of Nagorny Karabakh began to campaign for separation from Azerbaijan and union with Armenia. The conflict escalated into a full-scale war in 1991, ending in 1994 with the *de facto* secession of Nagorny Karabakh from Azerbaijan. Nagorny Karabakh exists today as a republic unrecognized by any state, including Armenia. A number of proposals have been put forward to resolve the conflict by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, although no proposal thus far has been acceptable to the conflicting parties. A key feature of the conflict was forced population movements. It is estimated that over 400,000 Armenians became either refugees from Azerbaijan to Armenia or were internally displaced in border regions. Over 200,000 Azeris became refugees from Armenia to Azerbaijan, while there are over 600,000 internally displaced persons in Azerbaijan today.

After the embargo, you can access the report, *Azerbaijan: Displaced then discriminated against -- the plight of the internally displaced population*, at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur550102007>

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