

Russia praises Azerbaijan's 'constructive' approach to return of Nagorno-Karabakh refugees

Arshaluys Barseghyan · OC Media · 2024-10-17

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova has said Azerbaijan is taking 'constructive' actions to facilitate the right to return of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, as evidence mounts of the demolition of residential and cultural heritage buildings in Nagorno-Karabakh.

'We have repeatedly commented on and emphasised the constructive steps taken by Baku to provide the population that left their native places with the opportunity to return there', Zakharova said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

She added that Russia had raised the issue during bilateral talks with Azerbaijan, and received 'relevant explanations'.

'At the same time, I say again, the opportunity to return was and is there. If, as you say, people are interested in preserving their homes, their native places, then perhaps they should take advantage of it,' she said.

Zakharova's comments were in response to a question regarding the demolition of Armenian residential buildings in Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan, including the historical quarters of the region's capital, Stepanakert, which date back to the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Footage has continued to emerge illustrating this destruction across the region, which has intensified over the past year.

In September, Bellingcat, an open-source investigation platform, analysed satellite imagery of Stepanakert, concluding that 'hundreds of incidents' of what appeared to be the ransacking of civilian homes across the entire city.

On 11 October, Nagorno-Karabakh's former human rights ombudsman, Gegham Stepanyan, commented on the destruction in a post on X, stating that the property rights of thousands of people were 'grossly violated' and that it constituted 'cultural genocide'.

Focusing more concretely on this issue, Zakharova emphasised that the territory is under Azerbaijani law, and that 'if they have any questions, then this should be resolved in the relevant institutions created for this purpose, for example, UNESCO'.

In response to a follow-up question which noted that Nagorno-Karabakh refugees do not trust Azerbaijan and are not ensured of their safety in case of their return, Zakharova asked why such a question was directed towards her. She instead suggested asking Armenia if they have done anything to facilitate the return of refugees.

It is 'simply impossible'

Former human rights ombudsman Gegham Stepanyan slammed Zakharova's comments.

'It was truly sad to see that level of audacity displayed by a Russian Foreign Ministry representative', he told OC Media, 'because I am more than sure that they understand very well that the existence of Armenians under Azerbaijani rule is simply impossible, and despite

understanding all this, they cynically continue to assert the same thing'.

Stepanyan added that Zakharova represented a country whose peacekeepers allowed the mass displacement of the region's Armenian population, and that Russia 'completely failed' to take appropriate actions based on the November 2020 ceasefire agreement to ensure the safety and peaceful life of the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Around 2,000 Russian peacekeepers were deployed to the region in 2020 with a five-year mandate as part of the agreement that ended the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.

They were meant to provide security for the region's ethnic Armenian population, numbering over 100,000. However, they declined to intervene when Azerbaijani troops launched their last offensive on the region in September 2023, which resulted in the exodus of the region's entire Armenian population.

In April, the Russian peacekeepers left the region, before the official end of their mandate.

Stepanyan also added that it was 'absurd' to discuss the possibility of return in the way that Azerbaijan and Russia envision.

'When the fundamental rights of the people are so grossly violated, it is simply illogical, inhumane, and contrary to the provisions of international law to settle those same people under the control of the author of those crimes,' Stepanyan said.

He added that Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians see their 'safe and dignified return' occurring under 'proper representation' of the international community on the ground, and noted that they currently have a goal to establish an international platform where the implementation of the right to return can be properly addressed.

Earlier this year, in mid-January, Zakharova accused Armenia of 'falsifying facts' about the actions of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh. She also demanded evidence to support Armenia's claims that ethnic cleansing took place in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev stated in July that the right to return of Armenian refugees should be 'mutually ensured', and that it must include the right for Azerbaijanis displaced from Armenia in the early 1990s to return.

In the final days of the Soviet Union and the immediate post-independence period, hundreds of thousands of Armenians and Azerbaijanis fled or were expelled from Azerbaijan and Armenia, as ethnic tensions flared in the run up to the First Nagorno-Karabakh War.

On 16 October, the same day as Zakharova's statements, Swiss legislators introduced a motion calling for a peace forum on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to be organised by the Federal Council of Switzerland. They offered to 'facilitate an open dialogue between Azerbaijan and representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians under international supervision 'to negotiate the safe and collective return' of the refugees.

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