

Nagorno-Karabakh 'on the verge of humanitarian crisis'

Ani Avetisyan · OC Media · 2022-12-14

The Lachin Corridor, the road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, has been blocked for over 48 hours, cutting off the region's imports of food and medical supplies. Since Tuesday evening, the gas supply to the region has also been disconnected.

The road was first blocked by a group of Azerbaijani protesters at 10:30 on Monday, allegedly to protest illegal mining in Martakert (Aghdara) region.

Since the end of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the Lachin Corridor has been the only open connection between Nagorno-Karabakh and the rest of the world. The road remains under the control of a Russian peacekeeping contingent.

On Tuesday evening, supplies of gas to Nagorno-Karabakh appeared to have also been cut, leaving residents without heat. Nagorno-Karabakh government officials accused Azerbaijan of disrupting the supply of gas, which is provided by Armenia but passes through Azerbaijan-controlled territories.

Nagorno-Karabakh is heavily dependent on Armenia for food and medical supplies. According to Gegham Stepanyan, the region's Human Rights Defender, over 400 tons of 'essential' goods, 'including grain, flour, vegetables, fruits' are imported from Armenia daily.

Since the closure of the road began, the State Minister of Nagorno-Karabakh, Ruben Vardanyan, has been going live on his Facebook page to, in his words, provide 'first-hand information' about the situation on the ground. In one of the live streams, Vardanyan stated that the 'crisis' had become a 'reality' and called on people to be 'frugal' as he could not say how long the situation would last.

'We are doing our best to let the whole world know about it, to let them see the true face of Azerbaijan, to make them understand that it is simply impossible to live with them', Vardanyan said.

On Wednesday morning, Nagorno-Karabakh's authorities warned of a shortage of fuel, gas, and diesel in the region, despite having closed educational institutions that use gas for heating, and calling on people to save energy and use vehicles only in cases of extreme necessity.

Over a thousand residents of Nagorno-Karabakh, including more than two hundred children, have been unable to return to their homes. Nagorno-Karabakh's Ministry of Health has also stated that patients requiring urgent medical assistance in Yerevan are stuck in Stepanakert, putting their lives at risk.

'Genocidal policy' or 'environmental protest'?

Since the road closure began, Yerevan and Stepanakert have been at odds with Baku, with the two sides maintaining entirely different accounts.

Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh have officially accused Azerbaijan of organising the blockade, with Armenia's Prime Minister and Ministry of Foreign Affairs referring to Azerbaijan's 'policy of genocide' against Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has further warned that the region is facing 'the imminent threat of a food and humanitarian crisis'.

However, Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has denied responsibility for the road's obstruction, claiming that the aim of the protest by 'environmental activists [...] is not to block any roads, and civilian vehicles can move freely in both directions'. Instead, the ministry alleges that the road has been blocked by the Russian peacekeepers.

[Read more on OC Media: Lachin corridor blocked by Azerbaijani 'eco-activists']

The activists themselves additionally claimed that a 'humanitarian corridor' would be provided for ambulances. Although footage published on 14 December showed a Russian peacekeeper vehicle being allowed through, there have been no reports of civilian or medical vehicles entering the corridor.

While denying responsibility for the road's blockage, Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs also stated that 'the issue of the rights and security of the Armenian residents living in the Karabakh region is an internal matter of Azerbaijan.'

'Karabakh is an integral part of Azerbaijan, and the rights and security of the population of Armenian origin living in this region will be ensured in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan.'

Hikmat Hajiyev, Assistant to the President of Azerbaijan, specifically mentioned Ruben Vardanyan, Nagorno-Karabakh's State Minister, and said that he would 'not be allowed to loot Azerbaijan's natural resources and cause serious damage to the environment'. This echoed the accusations of protesters, who are demanding that Azerbaijani officials and specialists be allowed to visit mines in Aghdara, alleging that illegal mining is causing environmental damage in the region.

[Read more on OC Media: Billionaire Ruben Vardanyan to serve as Nagorno-Karabakh's State Minister]

Regarding the halt in gas supply, the Azerbaijani state gas provider Azerigas published a statement on 14 December, denying the claim that Azerbaijan was responsible for the cut.

'Azerbaijan has nothing to do with the issue in question. Gas supply in the territories where Russian peacekeepers are temporarily stationed is carried out by Armenia, and the mentioned territories are not integrated into the gas supply system of our country,' the statement read.

Military action 'inappropriate'

Within Armenia, both state figures and the broader public have condemned the road's obstruction and demanded action to support Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, with protesters taking to the streets.

On Wednesday, the Armenian opposition called an extraordinary session of parliament to discuss the situation.

A declaration was adopted at that session, which called for Russia to 'ensure the full implementation' of the conditions of the 2020 ceasefire agreement in areas under the control of Russian peacekeepers, called on international organisations to 'prevent the unfolding of a humanitarian disaster in Nagorno-Karabakh', and asked that the UN Security Council and OSCE Minsk Group send a mission to Nagorno-Karabakh to 'monitor the humanitarian situation'.

A senior MP from the opposition Armenia alliance, Artsvik Minasyan, added on Wednesday that Armenia should be ready to 'resort to military intervention' if necessary. Ruling party MPs have

stated that they do not consider military action appropriate.

People also took to the streets to show their support for Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, with over a thousand protesters attending a rally led by the former ruling Republican Party in the centre of Yerevan on 14 December. Protesters and attendees, including the third president of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, accused the Armenian government of abandoning the region.

A protest was also begun by former State Minister of Nagorno-Karabakh Artak Beglaryan, who was not able to return to Stepanakert after travelling to Yerevan for a working visit. He announced on Wednesday that he was launching a movement to draw attention to the events in Nagorno-Karabakh and demand action, beginning with an indefinite sit-in in front of the city's UN office.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has thus far only addressed the issue on the first day of the corridor's obstruction, in a speech at the opening of the fourth Global Forum Against the Crime of Genocide. He claimed that stopping the operation of the Lachin corridor meant 'to condemn the population of Nagorno-Karabakh to genocide'.

Armenia's Foreign Ministry has called for the international community's attention stating that Azerbaijan's 'actions may lead to a large-scale humanitarian disaster', and described the blockage of the Lachin corridor as a 'practical manifestation' of Azerbaijan's 'policy of genocide against the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh'.

International reactions

In statements on Tuesday, the EU External Affairs spokesperson Peter Stano and the US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price called on the Azerbaijani government to restore free movement through the Lachin corridor.

The EU External Action Service reiterated the call for 'the Azerbaijani authorities to ensure freedom and security of movement along the corridor, in line with the trilateral statement of 9 November 2020' and stated it was 'ready to contribute' to dialogue and consultations with 'the parties involved'.

In a daily State Department briefing, Ned Price stated that 'any disruption to energy infrastructure could precipitate a humanitarian crisis, especially as we're entering the winter months'.

'If deliberate, it's unacceptable to target the civilian population of Nagorno-Karabakh', Price said.

France also called for an 'unconditional restoration of access and supplies to Nagorno-Karabakh, while respecting the rights of the population residing there'.

On the second day of the closure of the corridor, the Russian Ministry of Defence confirmed it, stating that the peacekeeping contingent was negotiating with Azerbaijan.

For ease of reading, we choose not to use qualifiers such as 'de facto', 'unrecognised', or 'partially recognised' when discussing institutions or political positions within Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia. This does not imply a position on their status.

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