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The Humanitarian Crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh

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The Humanitarian Crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh

We draw physicians' attention to the humanitarian crisis unfolding in the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. Nagorno-Karabakh, an area of 1,700 square miles wedged between the Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan, is home to about 120,000 people including about 30,000 children. Nagorno-Karabakh, also known as Artsakh, was a region within the former Soviet Union with a predominately Armenian population which enjoyed limited self-governance. However, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union its status has been a contentious issue between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Since 1991 Nagorno-Karabakh has been a *de facto* independent state. A 44-day war in 2020, started by Azerbaijan during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, resulted in thousands of deaths, more than 10,000 injuries and displacement of many more people (1). Following the ceasefire, the only supply route for food, medicines and fuel connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to the Republic of Armenia became the Lachin corridor (2, 3).

In December, 2022 Azerbaijan began a blockade of the Lachin corridor which has resulted in starvation with inhabitants forced to wait in long queues for food and medicines. The public transportation system has collapsed and there is concern about fuel for home heating this winter. Local physicians report malnutrition is causing miscarriages, pregnant women are unable to reach hospitals to give birth, there is no infant formula and lack of adequate nutrition has impeded breastfeeding.

People with chronic illnesses cannot access basic medicines such as insulin. Others with suspected cancers cannot have diagnostic studies whilst those with cancer lack access to simple anti-cancer drugs (4). Access to cancer services in the Republic of Armenia is now blocked. The Red Cross, the only operational relief organization, cannot guarantee safe transportation of critically ill persons to the Republic of Armenia.

Even before the current crisis the region faced challenges in providing adequate health care to the population but the blockade has driven it to a critical point. The former chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court recently opined: *There is an ongoing genocide against 120,000 Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh*

(https://luismorenoocampo.com/lmo_en/report-armenia/). Although most people think genocide implies mass killing this is not so. The legal definition in the 1948 Genocide Convention of genocide is *acts committed with intent to destroy” a particular ethnic, racial or religious group*. The objective of the blockade is to starve the resident Armenians so that they die or flee.

We are not alone in our assessment of the situation in *Nagorno-Karabakh* (5). The International Association of Genocide Scholars warned of *the risk of genocide* (<https://genocidescholars.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/IAGS-EB-AB-Statement-on-Azeri-Blockade-of-Artsakh.pdf>), the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention issued an *active genocide alert* (<https://www.lemkininstitute.com/active-genocide-alert-1/active-genocide-alert-azerbaijan----in-artsakh-and->), Genocide Watch has declared a *genocide emergency* (<https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/genocide-emergency-azerbaijan-s-blockade-of-artsakh>).

We urge the global medical community to voice concern and take actions which might help end blockade of the Lachin corridor until a reasonable compromise can be reached between authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan. We must stop this genocide.

Conflict of Interest RPG is a consultant to Antengene Biotech LLC; Medical Director, FFF Enterprises Inc.; A speaker for Janssen and Hengrui Pharmas; Board of Directors: Russian Foundation for Cancer Research Support; and Scientific Advisory Board: StemRad Ltd. GT is an APRI Armenia fellow and co-founder of P53 Inc.

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