

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing  
on  
Safeguarding the People of Nagorno-Karabakh

June 21, 2023 – 2:15 p.m.  
2360 Rayburn House Office Building

Statement of Ambassador Sam Brownback

The 120,000 mostly Christian residents of Nagorno-Karabakh are being blockaded by Azerbaijan with the blessing of their ally Turkey. If the people of Nagorno-Karabakh were Muslim it is hard to believe this would be happening. The Islamist government of President Erdogan would not permit it.

But President Erdogan does support this blockade, as he does many forms of aggression against Armenia, the tiny strip of land that stands between him and his pan-Turkic ambitions. He is one of the top exporters of militant Islamic doctrine in the world today, much to the dismay of many Muslim scholars and countries that support religious freedom and pluralism, and want to avoid a clash of civilizations.

The Lachin Corridor, the only supply route into Nagorno-Karabakh, is supposed to be maintained as an open supply route by Russian peacekeepers. It is not. Only bare humanitarian food supplies and basic medical necessities have been allowed in over the past six months, in violation of the 2020 ceasefire and a 2023 International Court of Justice order.

Last week, Azerbaijan made the humanitarian crisis total by completely sealing off the corridor - not even Red Cross vehicles were being allowed through to transport critically-ill patients seeking medical care. Azerbaijan has also shut off the gas supply to the people of Nagorno-Karabakh at different times to create hardships for residents.

The Azeris, with Turkey's backing, are slowly strangling Nagorno-Karabakh, making it unlivable so that the region's Armenian population is forced to leave.

This is a question of the rights of the Armenian Christians of Nagorno-Karabakh: does this religious minority have a right to survival in their ancestral homeland? The only just answer is yes, they have the right not to be driven out, starved out or blockaded by the government of Azerbaijan.

This is the modern answer to the old "Armenian question" that led to the 1915 genocide that killed an estimated 1.5 million Armenians. A genocide that would have been even worse but for the involvement of the American Christian community that sent aid and rescued orphans by the thousands in the face of Ottoman efforts to annihilate the Armenian people. Two decades later, as he would order his own Holocaust of a religious minority, Adolf Hitler would infamously ask, "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"

We must stand up for these Armenians or we will see yet another ancient Christian population

forced out of its homeland. Haven't we seen this too many times in recent Middle Eastern history? Do we need to see it again, this time perpetrated with U.S. supplied weaponry and backed by Turkey, a member of NATO?

The U.S. State Department and the International Court of Justice have both recognized Azerbaijan's responsibility for the blockade, calling on them to resolve the crisis. Even so, Azerbaijan refuses to do so, displaying confidence that the U.S. will not hold them accountable. We should call their bluff. If Azerbaijan will not lift the blockade, Section 907 sanctions must be applied by President Biden to Azerbaijan for the offensive use of American-made military equipment against Armenia.

Some might recall that almost 25 years ago, I supported the Section 907 sanction waiver for Azerbaijan when I was in the Senate proposing the Silk Road Strategy Act, a broad US engagement strategy in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Now the situation has changed, as have the actions of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Russia in the region. Should Azerbaijan once again show themselves to be a responsible partner, I might support 907 sanction waivers again. But not with how they and Turkey are acting today. Magnitsky sanctions should also be considered against the Azerbaijani leadership responsible for the blockade.

Congress should take the lead with a bipartisan Nagorno-Karabakh Human Rights Act to establish the basic security guarantees we expect the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh to enjoy and ensure that their freedom of movement be reestablished. A congressional delegation should also travel to Nagorno-Karabakh. On my recent trip to the region, our group was not allowed access.

The geopolitical alignments in the South Caucasus are shifting. Armenia and Azerbaijan sit in a strategic location at the junction of Iran and Russia, so it is in the United States' national security interests to ensure a satisfactory resolution to this conflict. It is also in keeping with our national commitment to promoting religious freedom that we ensure endangered religious minorities receive protection.

The Armenian people have shown themselves to be an innovative, freedom loving people in a region that often supports dictatorial leaders. They should be encouraged. The U.S. should ensure their budding economy has chance to grow and find ways to guide them past Iranian and Russian influences through the development of their own national strength.

Armenia should develop thriving economic cooperation with the EU and should be designated a Major Non-NATO Ally of the US. Armenia is our natural long-term ally with its hundreds of thousands strong diaspora thriving in every corner of our country. One was the doctor who treated the war wounds of my predecessor in the Senate, the late Bob Dole. In addition to these governmental actions, a civil society coalition of American Christians should be organized to once again focus our national attention on the plight of the Armenian people.

We cannot permit Azerbaijan to use its oil wealth to purchase advanced weapons systems to annihilate a religious minority in the region. What message does that send to other would-be aggressors in the world? President Aliyev has been a partner in containing Iranian ambitions, but the value of the relationship with Azerbaijan does not give them license to strangle an

ethnoreligious minority group with impunity. Instead, it gives the U.S. the right to call them to account for their actions. We have the capacity to stop this religious cleansing. We must use it.

Armenia is the Israel of Christendom. The first Christian nation on Earth. Persecuted over several millennia by multiple empires, yet they remain. Their tenacity and sheer pluck inspire every religious minority around the world.

We cannot allow another Armenian Christian genocide or crimes against humanity to unfold in Nagorno-Karabakh. Let us take our stand now like our American forefathers who stood with the persecuted Armenians during their holocaust.