

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 4, 2024

The Honorable Antony Blinken
U.S. Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We are writing to express our concern regarding the peace negotiations currently underway between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the aftermath of Azerbaijan’s military assault on Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. Specifically, we are concerned that key political leaders of Nagorno-Karabakh are currently held illegally as political prisoners by Azerbaijan and their release may not be part of any peace agreement.

Forcefully removing and detaining the political leadership of an ethnic group is a well-known tactic of those committing ethnic cleansing. Denying their freedom and ability to participate in the peace process means that peace is being negotiated without the voice or perspective of those with key knowledge of those affected by Azerbaijan’s atrocities.

On September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan launched a military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh in clear violation of the 2020 ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Azerbaijan had already caused a “dire humanitarian situation”¹ in the region through its nine-month blockade of the Lachin Corridor, which prevented food, medicine, and other essential goods from reaching Nagorno-Karabakh.² Within a matter of weeks, some 120,000 people – almost the entire population of Nagorno-Karabakh – were forced to flee.³ The European Parliament and other experts have described Azerbaijan’s actions as ethnic cleansing.⁴

While most of those forcibly displaced were allowed to cross the border into Armenia, there were several notable exceptions. In late September and early October, current and former leaders

¹ Press Statement, U.S. Department of State, Call for End of Hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh (Sept. 19, 2023), <https://www.state.gov/call-for-end-of-hostilities-in-nagorno-karabakh/>.

² Press Statement, U.S. Department of State, The Humanitarian Situation in Nagorno-Karabakh (Aug. 31, 2023), <https://www.state.gov/the-humanitarian-situation-in-nagorno-karabakh/>.

³ *Guarantee Right to Return to Nagorno Karabakh*, Human Rights Watch (Oct. 5, 2023), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/05/guarantee-right-return-nagorno-karabakh>.

⁴ *Situation in Nagorno-Karabakh After Azerbaijan’s Attack and the Continuing Threats Against Armenia*, European Parliament (Oct. 5, 2023), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0356_EN.html; David J. Scheffer, *Ethnic Cleansing Is Happening in Nagorno-Karabakh. How Can the World Respond?* Council on Foreign Relations (Oct. 4, 2023), <https://www.cfr.org/article/ethnic-cleansing-happening-nagorno-karabakh-how-can-world-respond#:~:text=The%20ethnic%20Armenian%20population%20of.have%20fled%20west%20to%20Armenia>.

of Nagorno-Karabakh's government were detained, such as Ruben Vardanyan, former State Minister; former Presidents Arkadi Ghukasyan, Bako Sahakyan, and Arayik Harutyunyan; Davit Babayan, former Minister of Foreign Affairs; and Davit Ishkhanyan, former Speaker of the Parliament, among others. Azerbaijan's Prosecutor General Kamran Aliyev indicated that this was just the beginning, as criminal investigations had been opened against a total of 300 former Nagorno-Karabakh officials.⁵

Requiring the release of political prisoners and prisoners of war is a critical step to achieving a sustainable peace. Yet, to date, Azerbaijan has incurred few costs from the international community for their continued detention, much less for the brutal ethnic cleansing of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. Instead, it has been awarded the privilege of hosting the next COP29 meeting, just months after its ethnic cleansing campaign and continued detention of these political prisoners.

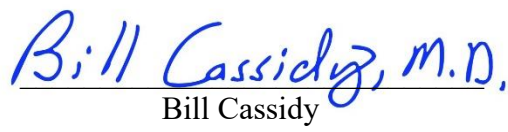
We therefore urge you to insist in your interactions with the Governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia that the release of the political prisoners must be a prerequisite to, or at least a condition of, any peace deal reached. Given the serious human rights violations perpetrated by Azerbaijan, we further urge you to label what took place in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 as an ethnic cleansing and advocate for the right of Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenians to return to their homes under international guarantees. The United States should also urgently impose sanctions against those responsible.

Thank you for your attention to these important issues.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Bill Cassidy
United States Senator



Thom Tillis
United States Senator



Gary C. Peters
United States Senator

⁵ *UN Team in Nagorno-Karabakh, a First in 30 Years, as Ethnic Armenians Flee*, AL JAZEERA (Oct. 1, 2023), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/1/un-team-in-nagorno-karabakh-a-first-in-30-years-as-ethnic-armenians-leave>; *Baku Issues 300-Person 'Most Wanted' List for Artsakh Officials*, HETQ.AM (Oct. 2, 2023), <https://hetq.am/en/article/160803>.