

Internal Forceful Displacement in Azerbaijan

Forced displacement in Azerbaijan is a consequence of the military aggression and ethnic cleansing conducted by Armenia in the territories of Azerbaijan. As a result of the military aggression of Armenia more than a million Azerbaijanis were forcefully displaced from their native lands. The forcefully displaced people in Azerbaijan were temporarily settled in more than 1600 heavily populated settlements in 12 tent camps, villages consisting of railroad cargo-vans, half-constructed buildings and public facilities.

Armenia's aggression attempt in 2020 yet again severely affected the lives of hundreds of thousands people in Azerbaijan. 84 thousand persons were forced to temporarily leave their places of habitual residence, among them the IDPs who repetitively suffered the tragedy of forced displacement. These people returned home with the rapid and effective response from the Government during 2020-2021.

The right of unconditional and safe return of Azerbaijani displaced population was confirmed in dozens of resolutions and decisions of the UN General Assembly, Security Council, OIC, PACE, OSCE, European Court of Human Rights etc. At the same time, international expert community commended Azerbaijan's progressive measures for assisting effectively its displaced population and setting one of the exemplary practices in this field.

The Government of Azerbaijan has assumed full responsibility for improving living conditions of the IDPs. The Government has been implementing the strategy for amelioration of living conditions of the forcefully displaced population, providing them with social assistance and benefits, and constructing of 116 new, compact and modern residential areas for their temporary settlement. We managed to achieve significant progress in improving living conditions of the forcefully displaced population by eliminating all tent camps and cargo-van villages and providing more than 320 thousand IDPs living in dire conditions with temporary homes without prejudice to their right to voluntary, safe and dignified return to their native lands. The poverty rate among IDPs has been reduced from 75 to 8 per cent.

The main priorities of the Government of Azerbaijan after the liberation of its territories from the occupation in 2020 are to clear these territories from mines and other unexploded ordnances, to restore the cities and settlements totally destroyed during the conflict and to create necessary conditions for voluntary, safe and dignified return of the IDPs. The process of rehabilitation of liberated territories is hindered by heavy landmine contamination and total destruction of the infrastructure. Accuracy of the mine maps provided by Armenia is less than 25 percent. In the period following the signing of the trilateral statement on cession of the military activities between Armenia and Azerbaijan in November 2020 more than 300 citizens of Azerbaijan became victims of mine explosions, among them many IDPs who were impatient to visit their liberated lands after three decades of forceful separation. Demining and reconstruction works are being conducted in the area, in order to provide the IDPs with the possibility of safe and dignified return.

Taking into account the huge scale of the Great Return to the liberated lands, currently the process is being realized through pilot projects. The first project has been realized in Aghaly village in Zangilan region, totally rebuilt on the "smart village" model. 86 families have already returned to Aghaly during the first stage of the pilot project. 20 families returned to Talish village of Tartar region and another 20 families to Lachin city in 2023.

On November 24, 2020, the Coordination Headquarters was established to resolve socio-economic, humanitarian, organizational and other urgent issues in the territories liberated from the occupation, as well as to coordinate activities in this field. The Headquarters includes the Interdepartmental Center and 17 working groups in economic, social, legal, energy, security and other fields.

On January 4, 2021, the "Karabakh Revival Fund" was established with the aim to ensure financial support and promote investments for restoration and reconstruction of the territories liberated from the occupation, and to transform the area into a region with sustainable economy.

One of the national priorities of the Government of Azerbaijan according to the "Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development" is realization of Great Return to the territories liberated from the occupation. In November 2022 "The first State Program of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the Great Return to the territories liberated from the occupation" was adopted. The main objectives of the program are to provide sustainable resettlement of the people in the liberated territories and reintegrate these territories to the country's economy.

The State Committee for Affairs of Refugees and IDPs and ADA University conducted a survey among IDPs to predict return potential to the liberated lands, as accurately as possible, in order to achieve voluntary and efficient return process.

In general, from its own experience of protracted internal displacement, Azerbaijani side can indicate that violation of the UN Charter and fundamental norms and principles of international law on state sovereignty, territorial integrity, inviolability of borders, as well as military aggression against a sovereign state and illegal occupation of its territory, ethnic cleansing and forceful deportation from the occupied territory are among the main causes of the internal forceful displacement. Today, after the liberation of the occupied territories heavy contamination of these lands with mines and other explosive ordnances and total destruction of infrastructure and property of the IDPs are the main obstacles for the safe and dignified return of the IDPs to their native lands. In this regard, active engagement of the international donor community and development agencies to post-conflict demining and rebuilding efforts, as well as advocacy for sustainable peace and reconstruction are important. We think that these issues demand special attention and advocacy of the Special Rapporteur.