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• (1405)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.)): Good afternoon. Welcome to meeting number 45 of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022. Members are attending in person in the room, as well as remotely through Zoom.

I'd like to make a few comments for the benefit of members and witnesses.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike, and please remember to mute yourselves when you are not speaking.

Interpretation for those on Zoom is at the bottom of your screen, and you have a choice of floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

I will remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

For today's purposes, the topic of our meeting is the current situation between Azerbaijan and Armenia and, more specifically, a focus on Lachin road.

I'd like to welcome the two witnesses, who will each have five minutes for opening remarks. We have Mr. Robert Cutler, who is a former senior research fellow at the Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at Carleton University. We also have with us Ms. Olesya Vartanyan, senior south Caucasus analyst for the International Crisis Group.

You will each be provided five minutes for your opening remarks, but when you have 30 seconds remaining, I will put up a red sign as a warning. We'd be grateful if you paid attention to that. The same goes when members are asking you questions.

Mr. Cutler, we will commence with you. You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Mr. Robert Cutler (Former Senior Research Fellow, Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, Carleton University, As an Individual): Thank you for the privilege.

For identification purposes, I am a fellow of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute and director of the energy security program at the NATO Association of Canada. I appear in my personal capacity and the views I express are my own. I matriculated at MIT for my bach-

elor's degree and earned my Ph.D. at the University of Michigan. I have taught at all university levels in Canada and internationally. For over 20 years I was a senior research fellow at Carleton University, as you said.

I will make my opening statement in English.

[Translation]

However, I will answer questions in the language in which they are asked.

[English]

Canada has a long history of co-operation with Azerbaijan and Armenia, starting with NATO's partnership for peace program in 1994. Beginning in 2001, tens of thousands of military aircraft and supply trucks transited Azerbaijan, carrying NATO forces and equipment to Afghanistan. Beginning in 2002, the Azerbaijani peacekeeping battalion participated in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. When the northern distribution network was established in 2009, Azerbaijan continued to be a key link until it was closed a few years ago.

Canada has had formal diplomatic relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia since 1992, when it recognized their territorial integrity within the borders they had before the Soviet collapse. Acknowledging four UN Security Council resolutions from 1993, Canadian policy has always supported Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and opposed separatism, just as it has done in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

Like Canada, Azerbaijan gives tangible support to Ukraine. It sends large cargoes of humanitarian aid. The State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic, or SOCAR, owns filling stations in Ukraine that give free fuel to such emergency services as ambulances and fire trucks. Azerbaijan recently provided Ukraine with emergency power generators for winter use.

What can Canada do today? First, Ottawa should do more to help demine the full one-sixth of Azerbaijan's territory—a region more than twice as large as the greater Toronto area—that was militarily occupied over the course of 30 years. Canada's contribution to the demining effort in Azerbaijan has not matched, I'm sorry to say, its international prominence on the issue. Many countries, NGOs and international organizations around the world contribute not just funding but also personnel and training and education assistance to Azerbaijan's long-term demining program.

Around the single destroyed city of Aghdam, no fewer than 80,000 mines were discovered and neutralized. Estimates of the number of mines laid throughout the formerly occupied territories range from upwards of one million. Canada should also encourage Armenia to fulfill its obligation under international law to turn over to Azerbaijan all maps of the mines laid by its forces during 30 years of military occupation, which it has so far refused to do.

Second, Canada should open an embassy in Azerbaijan. The latest crisis on the Lachin road, and indeed the whole political instability in the region, is today engineered by Russia, which seeks to derail the peace process. The European Union, United States and other western powers all agree that only direct bilateral contacts and negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia will succeed in arriving at a definitive settlement. Azerbaijan has many times declared its willingness to embrace Armenia, to reconcile the two civil societies and to build mutually beneficial co-operation, economically and otherwise. Russia alone opposes this, because it does not want to be locked out of the region where it has been so long accustomed to being the sole hegemonic power.

Both Canada and Azerbaijan are genuinely multicultural middle powers that continually punch above their weight in international diplomacy. Both Canada and Azerbaijan have demonstrated their belief in a rules-based international order by their actions, by their conduct of international diplomacy, by their participation in international co-operation and by their leadership of international organizations. If Azerbaijan is not as democratic as we might like, then without diplomatic representation we lose the chance to discover the real pluralism in Azerbaijani society, to engage in open dialogue and to tell official Baku what we think.

Azerbaijan is the most significant local geopolitical player in the broader region. Not only does it provide important support to Ukraine, but it's also a very important ally of Israel, which its neighbour Iran—ironically, like Russia, an ally of Armenia in the conflict—does not like. An embassy in Baku is essential, not only to be better represented in the broader Caspian region but also to get an even-handed view from the ground, sensitive to all the critical nuances upon which the whole future of the region will turn.

Thank you for your attention.

• (1410)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Cutler.

We'll now go to Ms. Vartanyan.

You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan (Senior South Caucasus Analyst, International Crisis Group): Good afternoon, Chairman Ehsassi, Vice-Chair Bergeron and distinguished members of the committee.

You have already had the chance to listen to a number of speakers who have provided details of what's happening on the ground in Nagorno-Karabakh. Today, at this important hearing, I will aim to support you with more context as to why we are seeing these developments and what should be done to stop them from happening, not just now but also in the future.

I will be speaking using analyses of my many colleagues at the International Crisis Group. Together we are doing field research and speaking to those who are affected by the conflict and to decision-makers from all different sides, both in the region and in foreign capitals.

International Crisis Group has been working on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict for over 15 years. During this period, we have seen many ups and downs. The latest war was in 2020, and it took the lives of over 7,000 people in six weeks of brutal fighting. This year, we at the Crisis Group included Nagorno-Karabakh in the top 10 conflicts to watch worldwide. This was based on our analyses of the events that started taking place last year. Unfortunately we now see more potential for a new war in the region. Let me explain why.

Last year, Armenia and Azerbaijan started peace talks. Their leaders met several times, and foreign ministers started discussing the peace treaty. Their sights were really ambitious as they aimed to finalize the work very fast. Some even aimed for the end of the year, but the contents of these conversations were really difficult, with too many important parts that still needed to be discussed. Unfortunately, given all of the complexity of the talks, this negotiation process still has more chance of collapsing than of succeeding, but when or if that collapse happens, it will certainly be bad news as it will open chances for more instability in the region.

The stakes are really high for a new war. Last year, we already saw three escalations, each deadlier than the previous one. Two of them were in Nagorno-Karabakh and one was at the border. Azerbaijan has been making use of its military upper hand while Russia has been busy invading its neighbour and while others in the world have been distracted with responding to the war in Ukraine.

As a result, last year Azerbaijan seriously reinforced its positions, which have now been provided with significant military advantage should a new fight start. When I travelled to the place of the most recent fighting at the border, I saw the Azerbaijan military reinforcing its positions. In case of a new flare-up, Azerbaijani soldiers can make a military push through the only gorge that now separates their positions from the Azerbaijan exclave of Nakhchivan to the south of Armenia. This would cut Armenia in two, with severe humanitarian consequences, and it would leave the Armenian leadership under enormous pressure to make concessions.

To prevent this from happening, the European Union announced two days ago that it would deploy eight civilian unarmed monitors to observe the situation on the ground and report directly to all of the member states. In the coming days, we at the Crisis Group will have a report that discusses in detail what and how this should be done to make the mission work. Canada, similar to other interested outside actors, should support this mission and help it get enough staff and the necessary means and mandate to effectively prevent incidents that have the potential to spiral into a new war.

The mission will minimize chances of a new war, but it will not be able to completely eliminate the risks. What will be essential is a functional negotiation process that should lead to a peace accord to put an end to this conflict. The European Union has been playing an important role in facilitating more contact between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It brought leaders together and was present and ready to help when they agreed to proceed with the peace talks. The U.S. has been supporting this process. The European Union will need to pursue this diplomacy, and it should be supported by those in the region and in foreign capitals.

In light of all I have just told you, let me circle back to the events in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The situation is getting worse and many are worried, but as you can see, this is only the most recent manifestation of tensions. Indeed, more diplomatic pressure to relieve the situation is necessary, but what is also needed is a path for ending the cycle of crises and flare-ups, each one bloodier than the last. One way forward could be calls to resume contacts and talks. During the summer, the EU and the U.S. started working on a new track between Baku and Stepanakert. Such contacts could really help with resolving any future problems on the ground. They would also provide more confidence to the local Armenians that they will not be forced out of their home.

• (1415)

I will be happy to discuss these ideas in the question and answer session.

Thanks again for having me here for your session.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Vartanyan.

We will now go to members.

Each of you will have six minutes.

Mr. Chong, we begin with you.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing.

We're here today in particular to focus on the blockage of the Lachin corridor. My questions will be focused on that issue in particular.

I'd like to understand what exactly is the physical nature of this blockage. Is it at the border between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia? Is it within Azerbaijan proper? Does the blockage consist of human people standing in the way of traffic, or are there trucks or other pieces of equipment blockading the route? I'd like to understand the physical nature of the blockage first.

If you could speak to that, it would be helpful. If you don't know, that's also okay; I'll move on to other questions. Either one of you or both of you can answer the question.

The Chair: Please go ahead, Mr. Cutler.

• (1420)

Mr. Robert Cutler: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for your question, which betrays a widespread misunderstanding. I'm pleased to inform you that there is no blockage. Since some time—months—a thousand trucks of the Russian peacekeeping forces and the ICRC have passed through the Lachin road.

The situation started on December 13, when Azerbaijani eco-activists sought access to the territory temporarily occupied by Russian peacekeepers in order to verify the observation of ecological laws by a Swiss company, which, contrary to international law, is mining gold in the occupied territories. In fact, a British company, which has the contract to these deposits, has formally drawn the attention of the American, British and other governments to this fact.

The particular problem was not only that these illegally mined deposits were being taken to Azerbaijan for refinement and export through the corridor or road. There was also the ecological problem of not observing the necessary protocols for maintaining the environment. That was the original motive of the Azerbaijani protest on the road on December 13.

What happened then was that Russian peacekeepers blocked the road by erecting fences across the road to prevent the Azerbaijani protesters from proceeding further. That blocked the road for about a week. Then Armenians from Hankendi, a city that during the Soviet period was called Stepanakert, made an excursion, a manifestation, out from their city along the road to the place where it was blocked to see that it should be unblocked.

Following this, the Russian soldiers took down their fences, and since then there has been free passage of vehicles through the road. They're making sure there are no illegal exports of gold and making certain that there are no mines being imported to be laid, as has been done, so the road is now open.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Could I hear an answer from Madam Vartanyan as well on this? What is the physical nature of the blockage? Maybe you can give your perspective on what is going on.

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan: Thank you so much for giving me an opportunity to respond to the question.

I believe you have already heard from a number of people who not only have heard from someone about this but also have a personal connection to the region. We at the Crisis Group speak to those who are affected by the conflict.

I had a chance to speak to those who are currently in Stepanakert. In fact, I have been doing that since the very beginning of the blockade, which has lasted for over 40 days. What I understand is that people are not able to travel through the road.

The 2020 war left us with a peace accord. According to this peace accord, we got the territories that are currently populated by the ethnic Armenian people and the Russian peacekeepers who are present there. The Russian peacekeepers are responsible for keeping up and observing the ceasefire on the ground.

In addition to this area, there is a road, and this is the only road that connects Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia and, as an effect, to the outside world. The current blockage is happening at exactly that place.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have no further questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chong.

We will now go to Dr. Fry.

You have six minutes, Dr. Fry.

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here. I think both witnesses have shed some light on what is going on with the Lachin road. That's a big issue that we're here to look at. Is it creating a humanitarian crisis? That's what we're asking at this committee and what we're trying to find out, as well as, of course, whether Canada can do anything.

I want to ask a couple of very important questions. We know that the European Union became engaged and we know that Russia is meant to do the peacekeeping. We also know that there were observers from the European Union there. There's a report on all of that. People are engaged in trying to find out what's going on.

There's a big thing that I want to ask about. The United Nations can intervene. The United States has intervened and met with both sides. France has intervened and met with both sides. We know that Russia, actually, officially intervened around Christmas and met with both sides.

What do you think the chances are that the OSCE, the group that originally was dealing with the Minsk agreement...? Why did that fail? What can the OSCE do? The OSCE doesn't really have troops to put in, but members of the OSCE could marshal some help there. I mean, Canada's a member of the OSCE. As you know, there are

57 nation-states, some with and some without any kind of capability.

Why did the Minsk agreement, which is the official body for negotiating, fail? What are the chances that it can be renewed? What are the chances that we can put this to an end? Most of us want to see it end. Most of us want to see a peaceful settlement. Most of us want to see that people are able to go to their homes and to see that ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis are able to be friends. There was a time when they were friends. There was a time when many of them still continued, as Mr. Cutler said, the multicultural relationship and multireligious relationship they used to have.

What can we do? What is the role of Minsk and why did Minsk fail? Those are the two questions I'd like to hear either of you answer, perhaps starting with Ms. Vartanyan.

• (1425)

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan: This is a great question, especially the part about the OSCE's role.

We have that organization involved and also the OSCE Minsk Group. The co-chairs are France, Russia and the U.S. As you probably know, the Minsk Group has been facing enormous problems in resuming its functions after the 2020 war due to Azerbaijani resistance to engaging with the group. Baku believes the group failed with the negotiations regarding a peace accord. Baku still tried to engage with the group, but then they saw that it wasn't really going the way they wanted and the process got into a deadlock.

The other reason we're not seeing the OSCE Minsk Group come together is the Russian invasion of Ukraine. When the west got much more involved in mediating between the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders, we saw Russia basically withdraw from the group. It's still there on paper, so there is potential for it to come back, but at this moment, it's difficult to see any kind of co-operation taking place between the U.S. and Russia, including on Nagorno-Karabakh, unfortunately.

Having said that—

Hon. Hedy Fry: Thank you, Ms. Vartanyan. If you could perhaps wrap up what you're saying, I would like to give Mr. Cutler an opportunity to get involved as well.

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan: Absolutely. I just want to say that the OSCE should have the role. The recent events at the border, for example, show that the OSCE can send a mission and can do fact-finding, but that does not really mean.... Even if the OSCE, which Baku is so allergic about, cannot do its job, that does not prevent Canada from doing something and supporting, for example, the European Union the way the U.S. does.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Thank you.

Mr. Cutler, go ahead, please.

Mr. Robert Cutler: Thank you for the question.

To pick up on the last point made by the previous speaker, the OSCE did not send a fact-finding mission because the decision was poorly taken and without terms of reference.

The reason the Minsk Group has no chance, I'm sorry to say, is that its terms of reference have become obsolete. The Minsk Group's terms of reference were predicated upon the peaceful resolution of conflict, which has not come to pass. You are probably familiar with the six points in the so-called Madrid principles that were drafted in 2007 and revised in 2009. A reading of those six points shows that on their face they are obsolete. Either they have been accomplished or they have been overtaken by events. I think that's the way to say it. Also, if we look at the three co-chairs—Russia, France and the U.S.—none of them are interested in the Minsk Group anymore.

The U.S. Secretary of State just yesterday insisted that only direct bilateral contacts between the two parties was the way to proceed. France is not a neutral party due to very public proclamations by President Macron. For example, after the war broke out in the fall of 2020, he told his French co-citizens that France would not allow—this is almost a direct quote, because I wrote about it—Azerbaijan to reconquer upper Karabakh and that France will play its role to prevent this from taking place. That's a very close paraphrase, almost a direct quote. France is not trustworthy, and one can understand Azerbaijan's mistrust of France in this respect.

Finally, Russia doesn't want to give the U.S. or France a voice in things because they had been, until Charles Michel began his mediation or convocations in December 2021, which were very successful to a point.... Russia, following the November 2020 trilateral statement, was monopolizing the interactions between the two countries. None of the co-chairs of the Minsk Group have—

• (1430)

The Chair: I'm afraid you're out of time, Mr. Cutler.

Mr. Robert Cutler: —an incentive to proceed.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Fry and Mr. Cutler.

We'll now go to Mr. Bergeron.

Mr. Bergeron, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being with us today.

I'll address Mr. Cutler first. First of all, I would like to say that at first blush, his depiction of the situation seems to be an alternative take on the reality unfolding there. Indeed, this presentation does not, at first sight, correspond to all of the information circulating about what is really happening in the Lachin corridor. In that sense, I welcome his contribution to the work of the committee.

This prompts an immediate question. I must say that I am extremely dubious about the presentation, insofar as Canada, the United States, the European Union, France—which in any case the gentleman claims is not a reliable, credible and neutral player—in the first hours or days of the blockade, which would have taken place on December 12, demanded that Azerbaijan reopen communications. Yet Mr. Cutler presents a different sequence of events.

Mr. Cutler, are you suggesting that the intelligence services of the United States, the European Union, France and Canada were completely wrong?

Mr. Robert Cutler: I think the member has finished speaking.

Do I have the floor, Mr. Chair?

[*English*]

The Chair: The floor is yours, Mr. Cutler.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Cutler: Thank you for your comments, sir.

First of all, that is not information from the intelligence services, but information propagated by mass media. I assure you that all the findings I am sharing with you are based on reports from the field, which I follow on a daily basis.

Actually, it is indeed a different version of the facts, in that it differs from that presented by the mass media.

I'll give you an example. From the beginning, we have heard a lot about 120,000 people in Stepanakert being affected by a shortage of food, and so on. I'll say to you bluntly, honourable gentleman, that this figure is out of date, because it goes back to before the war in 2020. According to public statements and Armenian authorities, the population of Stepanakert is only 30,000.

There is also talk of the interruption of gas supplies, for which the Azerbaijanis are allegedly guilty. This is an underground gas pipeline built during the occupation, controlled by the Armenian state. Armenians in Armenia supply this gas to Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan is not in a position to cut off this gas supply. Last year, the same story was told. I remember, because I follow the events very closely, and I am sure that the same story will be told next year. In fact, the Azerbaijanis had to ask permission from the Armenian authorities and the Russian troops to intervene on the ground and do what was necessary to solve the problem. They were allowed to do so, and the problem disappeared.

So this is not private information coming from the intelligence services or secret services, sir. It is information propagated by the mass media. We have learned for some time to be skeptical in assessing all of this kind of information.

In conclusion, sir, I assure you that as a specialist I follow events closely on a day-to-day basis. You say that I am presenting a different version of the facts. Indeed, it differs from the so-called reality that is portrayed by the media, but I assure you that it is the reality on the ground.

• (1435)

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I wouldn't want to get into conspiracy theories by claiming that the mass media, as you call them, are trying to impose a scenario that does not correspond to reality. By whom would this be controlled, and why? I'm not sure, but I'm all the more surprised by your statement as it seems to suggest that states such as Canada, the United States and the European Union countries would base their public positions internationally solely on mass media information rather than on information provided to them by their intelligence services.

In any case, I would like to address Ms. Vartanyan now. The chair tells me that I have very little time left, but when we have a chance to come back to this, perhaps you can say a few words about it. The trilateral declaration or ceasefire agreement states that the Lachin corridor remains under the control of the Russian Federation's peacekeeping forces and that Azerbaijan undertakes to guarantee the safe movement of citizens, vehicles and goods in both directions. Yet all indications are that one-way traffic is now prohibited.

Is this a clear violation of the ceasefire agreement?

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Vartanyan, I'm afraid you have only 20 to 30 seconds to respond because we're well over our allotted time.

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan: There is no need for me to spend more time on this. We just need to look at the ceasefire statement made in November 2020. Similar to this, there is also the OSCE statement about sending the fact-finding mission to Armenia last year, the one that Mr. Cutler questioned a while ago.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Vartanyan.

We'll now go to MP Davies.

Mr. Davies, you have six minutes.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll be directing my questions to Ms. Vartanyan.

It appears to me, or I'm sensing, that there may be some different versions of what's going on regarding the facts on the ground.

Ms. Vartanyan, is it your information or testimony that there is or is not a blockade of the Lachin road right now?

• (1440)

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan: We clearly identify the current events as a blockade, similar to human rights organizations like Freedom House and Amnesty International. There are also others who identify those very events as a blockade.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

I'd like follow up on my colleague Mr. Bergeron's question referring to the November 2020 ceasefire agreement. The agreement stipulates that the Lachin corridor "remains under the control of the peacekeeping contingent of the Russian Federation", and commits Azerbaijan to guaranteeing the security of the "movement of citi-

zens, vehicles and goods in both directions" along the Lachin corridor.

Is that happening right now? In your view, what steps is Azerbaijan taking or not taking to secure the movement of goods and people in both directions on the Lachin corridor?

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan: For over 40 days we have been seeing Azerbaijani civilians blocking the only road that connects Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia. A number of facts identify that activists are connected to the Azerbaijani government. We have been doing our own research into that. It's clear that these activists have links to the government. Even more, we have been seeing that the Azerbaijani leadership, when speaking and voicing some of their statements, are repeating or using the same wording used by the activists.

That makes us believe that those in the international community who are calling on Azerbaijan to follow the agreement and guarantee security and free passage there are right in calling on Azerbaijan to do something around that.

Mr. Don Davies: On January 19, the European Parliament adopted a resolution that condemned the "inaction" of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, and called for their "replacement with OSCE international peacekeepers, under a UN mandate". At the same time, that resolution criticized the Minsk Group for its "inactivity".

Do you agree with the European Parliament's call for the replacement of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh with OSCE peacekeepers under a UN mandate? If so, why?

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan: I understand that it's very important to proceed with discussions on the security and human rights of the ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh. According to the ceasefire statement made by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, the Russian peacekeepers who are currently present in the Armenian-populated areas of Nagorno-Karabakh are responsible for observing the ceasefire. If the international community can help the sides come up with a peace accord that can guarantee or give some other security reassurance that the local ethnic Armenians can continue living there, then I'm sure I'm not the only one who would support that. Many would.

The very first step for this to happen, I believe, is still to look into the possibility of resuming the international presence on the ground. Right now we have only the ICRC, with a humanitarian mandate, present on the ground. At the Crisis Group, from the very beginning, right after we saw the ceasefire statement in 2020, we have been pushing for more involvement of the international community, including, for example, by the UN assigning a mission that could have access, could observe the situation on the ground and could report directly to the UN Security Council on a regular basis. I'm sure it would help us learn more and first-hand about the events without references to strange reports and Twitter posts that some people follow. That could help us understand what's happening and what can be done to start proceeding to finish this conflict.

Mr. Don Davies: I'll end with this. I think I speak for everybody when I say we would all like to see peace in the region for all sides. How do views on the prospects for peace differ, say, in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh? What are the opportunities and hurdles to creating sustainable peace in the region?

• (1445)

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan: I think Armenia and Azerbaijan have been on the right track. They have been talking and they were discussing the very essence of very difficult topics. They should continue doing that. There should be no use of force and no situations like what we see in the Nagorno-Karabakh. Escalations prevent negotiations, and we should definitely see more contact taking place between Baku and Stepanakert to guarantee the future of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Mr. Don Davies: I see Mr. Chair holding up the red square. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move to the second round of questions. The first question goes to Mr. Hoback.

Mr. Hoback, you have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to thank both witnesses for being here this afternoon.

Ms. Vartanyan, how do you see the Russian role in this in terms of being peacekeepers? Do you feel they have support from both sides? Do you feel they have the respect and ability to actually fulfill that type of mandate?

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan: With respect to the question of peacekeepers, they have a very limited contingent present on the ground. They are based mainly along the main roads, with various checkpoints. They do not have enough personnel, for example, to provide any kind of security to the local population. From the very beginning there were questions among the locals, but given their understanding that this was the only international presence that had been agreed to so far, they were okay with it and were very supportive.

The longer it went on, the more problems they saw. Azerbaijan has been making use of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the fact that Russia would still prefer to focus only on its war, its illegal war, in Ukraine. What Azerbaijan has been doing—and this is what I described in my notes and previously in my presentation—is attacking Nagorno-Karabakh, doing so twice last year, and even the border. The latest escalation was, I would say, scaled up, because it lasted for two days and it was along 200 kilometres. You cannot really come up with a spontaneous attack like this without preplanned actions.

What I'm trying to say is that with Russian deterrence, some were ready to trust in the beginning, but that's definitely going away, with more questions on the ground. That's why I think it's really good that we are now having this conversation here, because these are the main questions right now. If it continues like this, who knows, maybe we'll see even more violence taking place in the region. We definitely don't want to face a situation in which we cannot respond to this new war. I'm afraid that such a war would be really devastating, with serious consequences.

Mr. Randy Hoback: We see the Russian historical influence in the region for sure.

You made a comment that you've seen the Armenian and Azerbaijani officials talking among themselves and looking for a path forward. Do you see any other countries interfering with that path forward? Do you see the expats or other groups making it impossible for this to be accomplished?

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan: I don't think that is really the case. Armenia has been a sovereign country for over 30 years. Azerbaijan has a very determined and realistic approach to many things. I think the main problem is still the fact that they are aiming to finish the process as soon as possible. They're looking into very difficult topics. Unfortunately, they're doing it without mediation because the OSCE Minsk Group has fallen apart, although it still exists on paper.

In addition to that, there is such a profound lack of trust when one side is always afraid that the other side can make use of their words or their positions or whatever statement they make. That prevents the achievement of some of the results that many would like to see.

I have been working here for over 15 years and I witnessed the war in 2020. In every single village I went to in Armenia during that war, there was a funeral. This has affected people. They want peace, but that peace should bring stability, not more potential for a new war.

Mr. Randy Hoback: How does the blockade fit into this equation? Is it part of that process? Is it a negotiating tool?

We've heard those surrounding it saying it's an environmental protest or it's based on mining issues, and I think a lot of people have discounted that. Is this a pawn being played as part of a bigger process?

• (1450)

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan: Look, if it were about the environment, there would be other ways to proceed.

Almost the same day the process started, when they blocked the road, the local authorities in Stepanakert tried proposing talks. Then they even proposed, "If you don't trust us, let's bring international experts and some international NGOs that can help us to look into your concerns and somehow resolve the problem." However, we clearly see that there is no traction. There is no communication going on around that.

The current blockade is a continuation of all the problems we saw last year, with more escalation and more masculinity shown by Azerbaijan. There is a need to find a way to address it, especially with growing humanitarian problems on the ground.

Mr. Randy Hoback: It looks as though the chair is giving me the red book, so I'll stop there.

Thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Oliphant, you have five minutes.

Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thank you to the witnesses.

I imagine you can tell that we are trying to unravel something here to get a clear picture of the microsituation within the macro context. The macro context is 100 years old. We understand that. There is a conflict that emerged in 1992 and that continues to this day, so it is very hard for us to sort out what is happening on the road at this time. We are hearing different versions of reality. I don't want to cast any aspersions on any of the realities we've heard, but I'm trying to understand what is happening.

If you don't have first-hand knowledge, can you point me now to someone who does? To both the witnesses, who should we be talking to in order to find out the situation?

Mr. Chair, could you ask the witnesses to respond, since they can speak only to you and not to me?

The Chair: Mr. Cutler, could you go first, please?

Mr. Robert Cutler: Yes. I believe there are open-source satellite photographs that are available, without interpretation, to be inspected. There are all kinds of reports from the ground, given that this is the year 2023. It's necessary, of course, to evaluate these reports very carefully, but with practice it's possible to do so. It is not necessary to have a conflictionist view of things in order to suggest that skepticism is always a good thing when one is evaluating information provided by people who have an interest in the information being believed or disbelieved.

I can answer only from my personal and individual experience. I was trained in the last decade of the Cold War. I cut my teeth on reading the Soviet press. It's necessary to evaluate even testimony that looks like it's first-hand and that says it's first-hand. It's always necessary to ask a question about the motives of the people providing it and to ask what the other angles are. It's like a jigsaw puzzle, and you have to put all the pieces together to equilibrate, to balance, what's more likely and what's less likely.

I'm not certain, sir, that there's a single source or even a small handful of sources that one can have recourse to with confidence to say that these are the ones we have.... With all due respect to the International Crisis Group, which I highly respect, they are one of a large number of analytical—

• (1455)

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Thank you. I'm just going to cut it off there because I have just one more minute.

I want to move on now to a different point. If truth is the first casualty of war—which I think we are hearing today—and somewhere truth is in there, it would seem to me that we have to back up and solve what was at one point a frozen conflict and what are now skirmishes from time to time and a blockade on a road, which may or may not be causing a humanitarian crisis.

What are your suggestions for the way ahead? Do we put emphasis on the Minsk process? Do we look at an alternative process? Is

it at the EU or is it another UN process? What would you recommend?

Ms. Vartanyan, please go first.

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan: Thank you so much.

I think two things should be done around the blockade. First, I think Canada should continue exercising pressure on Baku so that we can start seeing at least more movement going on along that road.

I speak to the people on the ground on a regular basis, and I understand that it's getting worse and worse. The contacts, unfortunately, are non-existent. These are the ones that could, for example, resolve some of the problems with the lack of gas supply or shortages of electricity. The lines are in the Azerbaijani-controlled areas.

The second thing is very important, and that is to call for talks. In that sense, the idea that the European Union and the U.S. have to create a direct channel between Baku and Stepanakert is a great idea. Belief in that could satisfy all sides.

It's very important to continue supporting the European Union's efforts to bring the leaders together. Also, as I said, I think Canada should be supporting the European mission to the Armenian-Azerbaijani border.

The Chair: We will now go to Mr. Bergeron.

Mr. Bergeron, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Robert Cutler: Excuse me, sir. Was the question not directed to me?

The Chair: Mr. Cutler, it was directed, but it went completely over time. I apologize for that. We'll have to go to the next member.

Mr. Bergeron, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As an active participant in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I have the opportunity to hear what Armenia and Azerbaijan have to say on this conflict, which has been going on between these two countries for many decades, as Mr. Oliphant pointed out.

Of course, we know that the Lachin corridor issue is directly related to this conflict. Zaur Shiriyev, an analyst with the International Crisis Group, told Eurasianet on December 15 that if Baku engaged in good faith with the local Armenians, it could reduce the risks to the peace agreement.

Could you tell us, very quickly, whether you feel a peace agreement is likely? Is peace possible or should we resign ourselves to this permanent state of war between the two countries?

My question is for both witnesses, equally.

Mr. Robert Cutler: Thank you.

May I have the floor, Mr. Chair?

[English]

The Chair: I did, Mr. Cutler.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Cutler: Thank you.

Sir, one can only agree regarding engagement between Baku and the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh. This took place in the summer and fall.

The other expert appearing before you today knows as I do that a new leader has been parachuted into Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh from Moscow. His name is Ruben Vardanyan and he is not from Nagorno-Karabakh. I am sure that there is no relationship between him and Ms. Vartanyan. I am not going to tell you everything about him, but let's say that, as soon as he arrived, Armenian policy became harder. And yet a clear improvement had been underway.

I take this opportunity to express my agreement on the need to put pressure on Baku. As I said at the outset, this requires a Canadian embassy in Baku, so that we can let that government know what Canadians think. Canada can help by increasing awareness regarding the mines issue, and by furthering the implementation of the 2020 agreement.

Thank you.

• (1500)

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Is it my turn again?

[English]

The Chair: No, because you've gone over your time, and this happened in the previous round as well, Mr. Bergeron.

We'll now go to Mr. Davies for the final question.

You have two and a half minutes, sir.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Vartanyan, I think in addition to political solutions, we must also pay attention to legal structures if we are truly building a rule of law-based international system. To that end, I note that on December 21, the European Court of Human Rights indicated to the Government of Azerbaijan that it should "take all measures that are within their jurisdiction to ensure safe passage through the 'Lachin Corridor' of seriously ill persons in need of medical treatment in Armenia and others who were stranded on the road without shelter or means of subsistence." At the same time, the court noted that "the extent to which the Government of Azerbaijan was currently in control of the situation in the 'Lachin Corridor' was disputed and unclear".

What is your sense of that? Why is Azerbaijan unable to control the situation in the corridor, or is it in control of the situation in the corridor?

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan: As I think I said before, we see that Azerbaijan is in control over protesters who are present on that road. There are other signs that the protesters coordinate closely with Azerbaijani governmental structures. Even more, we see the

Azerbaijani leadership speaking and using the same wording used by the protesters.

Mr. Don Davies: Thanks.

I guess I will end this on the humanitarian situation. It appears challenging to get information about that situation.

Can you give us a basic picture of what the current state of the humanitarian situation facing the people in the region is right now?

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan: The local people are experiencing shortages of food. There have been no vegetables or fruits for weeks now. There are other problems with medical supplies. If you go to the local drugstore, you cannot even get elementary painkillers, not to mention drugs that are needed for those who have cancer, for example, or diabetes.

In addition, almost half of Nagorno-Karabakh's population lives in Stepanakert. You can see very long lines of people in front of the stores who are trying to buy at least eggs or some cheese brought from the villages because they don't have any other food coming to Nagorno-Karabakh because of the blocked road.

In addition to that, the locals on the ground have started experiencing problems with heating. The gas comes and goes. Again, the gas pipeline and electric lines are on the Azerbaijani-controlled territory. Because of that, people have a shortage of basic food. They have no medical supplies, and in addition to that they are just freezing. This is winter and these are mountains.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

At this juncture, allow me to thank Mr. Cutler and Ms. Vartanyan. Thank you for your time, for your perspective and for your testimony. It was very helpful, and I know I speak on behalf of every member of this committee when I say that we hope to see an immediate peaceful resolution to this conflict.

We will now suspend for five minutes.

• (1500)

(Pause)

• (1510)

The Chair: We will now resume the meeting for the fourth hour of our hearing into the current situation between Azerbaijan and Armenia with specific reference to the Lachin road.

We are grateful to have with us here today Mr. Anar Jahangirli, who is the chairman of the board of the Network of Azerbaijani Canadians. We also have Professor Christopher Waters of the University of Windsor.

You will each be provided five minutes for your opening remarks. That will be followed by questions from the members. When you have only 30 seconds remaining, I will put up this sign, so please do wrap it up. That applies to both your opening remarks and the questions that are put to you by the members.

Mr. Jahangirli, you have five minutes. The floor is yours.

Mr. Anar Jahangirli (Chairman of the Board, Network of Azerbaijani Canadians): Good afternoon.

Thank you, Chair and committee members, for inviting me to testify. I represent the Network of Azerbaijani Canadians, a grass-roots community organization advocating for Canadian Azerbaijanis.

Earlier today, the committee heard from four Armenian witnesses and an expert who happens to be Armenian. I think it's very symbolic that the other side needs to present its point of view in five iterations. The Azerbaijani point of view will deliver the important facts that are missing from an inflamed narrative. One witness shall suffice to deliver the truth.

I've come here to speak at a very difficult time for the South Caucasus region, at a time when Russia's Vladimir Putin is trying to engineer yet another crisis and crack the fragile peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia. It is therefore very important to pause and look at what is not being said, so that we can put the situation in the context of what is actually taking place in the region.

I'll talk about three important timelines.

The first period covers the time when Armenia encouraged irredentism and ethnic separatism in Azerbaijan in the last years of the Soviet Union. Right after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., the conflict turned into a full-scale war. The single mass atrocity of this conflict, the Khojaly massacre, was committed against the Azerbaijani civilians in the heart of Karabakh, where 613 people were killed overnight by Armenian troops.

The war stopped in 1994, leaving about 15% of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territories under Armenian occupation and 700,000 indigenous Azerbaijani people of Karabakh having been ethnically cleansed from Karabakh and forced to live in IDP camps across the country. Speaking of refugees who were truly forgotten by the world, add to those another 200,000 Azerbaijanis from Armenia proper.

Since then, for 26 years, there have been negotiations, or rather an imitation of negotiations, with Armenia taking no steps to withdraw from the illegally occupied Azerbaijani territories.

The second timeline of events to look at began when the war erupted in September 2020 and saw Azerbaijan liberate most of its territories that were illegally occupied by Armenia. On November 9, after Azerbaijan took control of key terrain and the historic Azerbaijani town of Shusha, Armenia agreed to sign a statement under which it provided a schedule to withdraw its troops from the rest of the occupied Azerbaijani territories. Unfortunately, some clauses of said agreement remain unimplemented by Armenia. I would be happy to elaborate on those if time permits. Based on the mentioned statement, a Russian peacekeeping contingent will be deployed in the region until November 2025.

Since then, the parties have been engaged in peace talks. Last October in Prague, Azerbaijan and Armenia signed a declaration confirming their commitment to recognizing each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty. It was at that point that Putin's regime

parachuted an Armenian-Russian oligarch, Ruben Vardanyan, into Karabakh to destabilize the situation and derail the peace process.

This brings me to my final point, where we are now.

This individual, who is, by the way, sanctioned by Ukraine, quickly took power as the so-called "state minister" within Azerbaijan's Karabakh region, where the Russian peacekeeping contingent is temporarily deployed. Since December 12, Azerbaijani activists have been demonstrating on the road that the Armenians in Karabakh have been using to connect with Armenia proper. The demonstrations are against the illegal exploitation of gold and copper mines in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan—not against civilians or any humanitarian transport.

Currently Azerbaijani activists are controlling the road to prevent the transfer of illegally extracted gold resources and weapons. I reiterate that no humanitarian access is being blocked. This is evident given the many vehicles that continue to pass through daily. More than 1,000 vehicles and trucks have passed over the road in the past month and a half. This is the latest information.

While the current situation on the Lachin road is not at all where Azerbaijanis and Armenians should be, we question the motives of those amplifying easily refutable narratives put forward by a Russia-backed oligarch. We question the motives of those who have not once spoken in favour of the peace process and the signing of a peace agreement, but who have instead been regurgitating hateful pro-war propaganda. Our Azerbaijani Canadian community stands firmly against Russia's interference in the South Caucasus region, so that Azerbaijan and Armenia can continue peace negotiations leading to a peace treaty.

• (1515)

Therefore, we urge our Canadian government to question whether the narratives it amplifies are, first, fact-based or manipulated and, second, whether they will lead to a lasting peace in the region or aid the region in returning to Russia's sphere of influence.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Jahangirli.

Professor Waters, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Dr. Christopher Waters (Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Windsor, As an Individual): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair, and many thanks for the invitation to appear before the committee.

I have been studying the South Caucasus for 25 years, and that includes multiple trips to the region in my capacity as a law professor. The fact that Canada is now engaged with the South Caucasus in a way that it wasn't for much of those two and a half decades is partly thanks to this committee, in particular for its hearings held two years ago on the weapons transfers to Turkey and the subsequent ramifications of that for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, so thank you.

I have three points.

The first is that the blockade of the Lachin corridor represents a current and pressing humanitarian crisis. Secondly, I would argue that Azerbaijan bears state responsibility for that. Third, I would submit that Canada has good reasons to take a stance.

First of all, on the Lachin corridor as a lifeline, on November 9, 2020, as you know, the Russian-backed ceasefire agreement included, in part, a provision that, “The Republic of Azerbaijan shall guarantee the safety of citizens, vehicles and goods travelling along the Lachin corridor in both directions.”

Since 2020, the corridor has been a lifeline for the roughly 120,000 residents of Nagorno-Karabakh. Its blockade by Azerbaijan has already had dire consequences, and they are poised to worsen.

These actions have involved the cutting off of electricity and gas; food shortages, including rationing of staples such as wheat and buckwheat, along with vegetables and other supplies; shortages of medical supplies and an inability to transfer critically ill Armenian patients, including children, to hospitals in Armenia proper; and cutting off some children stranded in Armenia from returning to their families in Nagorno-Karabakh.

These actions represent not only breaches of the ceasefire agreement as well as international humanitarian and international human rights law. They are part of a broader effort to ethnically cleanse Nagorno-Karabakh. They come in a context of widespread Armenia-phobic statements propagated by the regime and the destruction of cultural property. It should worry us that the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention has issued red flag alerts for genocide in the region.

We can recognize that both sides have legitimate concerns about how the ceasefire has been implemented. I absolutely recognize that both sides have legitimate concerns in this regard, and we should press both sides to make genuine efforts to compromise to reach a lasting peace in the region, but there's no scope for false balance or “bothsidesism” over this particular issue of the Lachin corridor. The blockade is having immediate and dire humanitarian consequences for civilians. They are essentially being held hostage.

Let's be frank. Azerbaijan is an authoritarian state and claims that this blockade is a result of spontaneous Azerbaijani citizen activism are simply not credible, but don't take my word for it. Human Rights Watch, in its report on Azerbaijan, says, “The space for independent activism, critical journalism, and opposition political activity has been virtually extinguished”.

Power in Azerbaijan is in the hands of President Ilham Aliyev, a dynastic successor to his father, who has served as president since 2003. Even assuming that these eco-activists are private Azerbaijani individuals spontaneously blocking the road, Azerbaijan bears state responsibility. A state may be responsible for the effects of the conduct of private parties if it does not take the necessary measures to prevent those effects.

Let me give an analogy. A state is not responsible for individual citizens taking over an embassy, such as happened in Tehran, but it is responsible if it fails to take measures to prevent that or to act appropriately afterwards to protect the embassy or regain control

over it. Russia also bears state responsibility here, and perhaps that will come up in questions.

My third point is that Canada has good reason to be involved. As you know, 2020 marked the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Canada and Armenia. The celebrations were muted because of the ongoing violence, not because relations between Canada and Armenia are poor. On the contrary, relations between the two countries have never been stronger.

People-to-people links mediated through a sizable and engaged Armenian diaspora in Canada are strong. Politically, Armenia is on a reformist—albeit fraught—track following its 2018 Velvet Revolution. Geopolitically, Armenia is inching away from the Russian orbit and, diplomatically, Canada's recent announcement that it would open an embassy in Armenia, its first in the South Caucasus, was a very welcome step, as were the other recommendations from Monsieur Dion to, “Make Armenia a priority as a fragile democracy”.

• (1520)

Monsieur Dion's report was commissioned before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. In his mandate letter, he was specifically told not to look at the geopolitics of Canadian support for Armenia. Since that time, however, Canada's support has taken on greater geopolitical significance. Simply put, Canada's support for fragile democracies in the former Soviet areas matters more.

In conclusion, in my view, Canada, while continuing to press both sides to come to a durable peace, should condemn Azerbaijani actions over the specific issue of the Lachin corridor in words similar to its allies, the European Union and the Council of Europe, and use all diplomatic and economic tools to ensure that the humanitarian corridor is opened and remains open.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Professor Waters.

We now turn to the members for their questions.

The first member is MP Hoback for six minutes.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Thank you, Chair.

I appreciate both witnesses being here this afternoon to give us their perspectives on the situation.

Mr. Jahangirli, you talked about the issue of gold and copper mines being front and centre, and about the blockade being there because of environmental concerns—or not necessarily environmental concerns but concerns that gold and copper are being mined illegally. Can you expand on that?

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: Absolutely. The Azerbaijani side has on numerous occasions in the past expressed its grievance that mineral resources, gold and copper resources—copper resources within the Karabakh region—are being exploited illegally. Any company or any entity that seeks to conduct a mining activity within the internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan has to obtain a proper licence. That is as it is in any normal country—Canada, Europe or anywhere in the world. Unfortunately, for 26 years until 2020, that area, three times larger than it is now, where Armenians of Karabakh currently live, was under the occupation of the Republic of Armenia. Azerbaijan could not access those territories to ensure that the licensing was in place.

After the war in 2020, Azerbaijan had its territorial integrity established and recognized as per the statements signed on November 9 and 10 in 2020. Since then, Azerbaijan has been putting forward its concerns that any mining activity that is happening there must stop immediately.

More than that, the mining activity that has happened in the region has destroyed up to maybe 100 hectares of forestry in the region. This is a huge concern for Azerbaijan as well. This should not happen—

• (1525)

Mr. Randy Hoback: I apologize. I have only six minutes.

I guess the question I have then is this: If you have concerns about that specific issue, why would you take it out on the entire population? Why would the blockades block everybody? Why wouldn't you just blockade the vehicles that would be going in and out of the mine, for example, and address those?

You made the comment that 1,000 vehicles passed through, but we also heard comments that people were allowed to leave but not come back. Do you have statistics showing the number of vehicles leaving and the number of vehicles coming back? How many of those 1,000 are actually going into the region and how many are leaving the region for good?

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: The number that I referred to, the 1,000 vehicles that have come into the region and gone out of the region, is the number of Russian peacekeeping forces and ICRC carrying humanitarian aid and necessary supplies for the people living there.

I think we have to distinguish the demands of the protesters, the eco-activists who are purely environmental in nature, from the demands and grievances of the Azerbaijani government. I cannot speak for them, but I can explain. The demands of the Azerbaijani government here should be separated from the demands of the eco-activists, but the fact that they've aligned, the fact that they see that the eco-activists are putting forward very viable and very valid demands, and the fact that the Azerbaijani government has certain concerns that must be addressed....

There are two issues here—

Mr. Randy Hoback: I'm confused here.

Again, I'm just asking for your opinion. It's one thing to say, "Okay, I'm going to take action against this industry or these people involved in this industry," but to take action against the entire region in such a manner looks to me—from the outside looking in—

as though it's being overplayed. It's being taken to a level that it doesn't necessarily need to be. Would you not agree with that?

Why would you block food shipments, for example, going into the region? Why would you block medical shipments going into the region?

It's one thing if you want to block mining equipment going in there or things related to mining equipment. That would be one thing. Why would you escalate it to include other areas or products with nothing to do with the mining sector? Why would you go so strongly against people who are actually living in that region?

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: Anyone in Azerbaijan—including government and civil society—goes against the people who live there.

The Government of Azerbaijan has declared on many occasions that it's ready...and it is facilitating the traffic along the road for all civilian and humanitarian cargo. The concerns of the Azerbaijani government are related to military cargo, mining equipment and the mined natural resources.

There is an issue at hand that needs to be resolved. The concerns of the Azerbaijani government and society must be addressed. At the same time, we must ensure that the people living in that region receive the necessary supplies, equipment and life-supporting supplies.

Mr. Randy Hoback: I think I have 30 seconds left, so I have to be fairly quick.

Mr. Waters—

The Chair: I'm afraid your time is over, Mr. Hoback.

Mr. Randy Hoback: I don't have it.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'm sorry about that.

Now we go to Mr. Sorbara.

Mr. Sorbara, you have six minutes.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara (Vaughan—Woodbridge, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses today for their comments and presentations.

My first question is for the professor.

Could you just clarify or restate your comments on the role that Russia has to play within the corridor with regard to the November 2020 agreement?

Dr. Christopher Waters: The 2020 agreement indicates two things with respect to the Lachin corridor.

The first is that the Lachin corridor, which is five kilometres wide, shall provide a connection between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia and shall remain under the control of the Russian Federation's peacekeeping contingent. The other part of the paragraph is that the Republic of Azerbaijan shall guarantee the safety of citizens, vehicles and goods travelling along the corridor. There are dual responsibilities there.

Russia has clearly failed in its responsibility since it is distracted by the war in Ukraine. There's a power vacuum on the ground. Azeri authorities and their agents have quite clearly filled that power vacuum.

• (1530)

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: To follow up, my second question is with regard to the South Caucasus and the importance of that area in the world. You mentioned earlier on in your comments the work that was done by this committee to push that agenda forward and the work done by the Honourable Stéphane Dion.

Could you kindly comment on why it's so important for Canada to be involved in that region of the world?

Dr. Christopher Waters: It's politically significant in terms of its location. It's a potential key point in Eurasia, I suppose, with transit from Europe, Iran and other parts of the former Soviet Union. It has interesting and important mineral wealth, as well as oil and gas wealth. I think there are some important Canadian diaspora communities, which make it relevant to us.

Finally, as indicated earlier, in the new geopolitical context, as Armenia seeks to extricate itself from the Russian orbit—it has traditionally looked to Russia to be its security guarantor in the face of Turkish and Azeri hostility—this is a chance to support, to use Mr. Dion's words, a “fragile democracy”.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: My follow-up question for both of the witnesses today is with regard to the blockade that's occurring. We've heard some testimony on why and exactly what's happening on the ground. Can we not agree that it's safe to say the blockade is having a humanitarian impact on the individuals living in that area and that the impact is a negative one?

Dr. Christopher Waters: To my knowledge, there's no issue about that whatsoever, and it strikes me as being a kind of alternative reality to pretend otherwise. Not only have our allies made comments about this—the United States, the United Kingdom, France—but also the heads of UN agencies, including UNICEF.

Some minimal amounts of aid are getting through. I've seen footage of Georgian Red Cross trucks under the guise of an ICRC mission getting through. It's not that there's absolutely nothing getting through. There's very little getting through, and it's not sufficient to support the civilian population. A fraction of what traditionally goes across—

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Could we go to Anar now, please?

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: Thank you, Mr. Sorbara.

I think the fact that the activists' demonstrations have limited the traffic.... It's obviously limited. However, the necessary supplies are passing through the road, so it is not a blockade. It is a controlled road. To make sure that the grievances of Azerbaijan are addressed and the security concerns of Azerbaijan are addressed, there must be talks between the parties and there must be a comprehensive solution to that.

The November 10 agreement that ended the war in 2020 placed responsibility on the Armenian side as well to withdraw all its armed forces from the Karabakh region. It has failed to do so. In the time period that passed, Armenia used that corridor to transport

land mines to place in the occupied territory...in the territory where Russian peacekeeping forces are still stationed.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Thank you, Anar.

The Chair: My apologies, Mr. Sorbara. That was a mistake on my part. You have another minute, sir.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Thank you, Chair. I saw you hold up the red book, so I thought that was a sign to stop.

With regard to the current situation, obviously it's untenable. It can't remain as such.

If I can just put this out there—and I've heard the questioning from my colleagues—it's safe to say that any sort of peace agreement going forward is obviously going to involve a bilateral agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, without the interlopers of other countries—namely Russia—playing a spoiler role in that, if I can use that context.

Is that where we need to head to? Is that where we need to result...? Are there the conditions on the ground to do that? You can both take a shot at it, with 20 seconds each.

• (1535)

Dr. Christopher Waters: You've put your finger right on it. It's very difficult to see the way ahead, but I think it's possible.

One thing that's for sure in my mind is that the blocking of humanitarian aid is only going to entrench positions and is going to continue a frankly de facto ethnic cleansing on the ground. There are real issues to address, and some of them have been raised today in terms of finding a durable peace, but I think it's possible with direct talks, as well as international mediation, and there's room for Canada to support that.

Thank you.

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: I'd like to comment on the wording “ethnic cleansing”. Azerbaijan on numerous occasions has declared that Azerbaijan and its government, the Azerbaijani people's state, is ready to embrace its Armenian citizens. There is no question of that intent. That there is an intent of ethnic cleansing, I think is an overstatement and an exaggeration.

When it comes to the peace process, peace is possible. Rules-based international order is possible, and that's what Azerbaijan has been advocating for: the territorial integrity of states. Then we can talk about minority rights.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Jahangirli.

We now go to Mr. Bergeron.

You have six minutes, sir.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Jahangirli, we have had the opportunity to talk together a few times. You seem to me to be an extremely reasonable man, and I sincerely believe that you really want peace in the region.

However, there are a number of things that I cannot understand. For example, if you really believe that the two presidents want to reach a peace agreement, how do you explain the fact that only a few weeks after they met under French auspices, the Azerbaijani government decided to launch a large-scale offensive on Armenian territory in September?

[English]

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: Thank you, Mr. Bergeron.

My interpretation, from what I know from the media and the facts I've seen on the news, is that the September skirmishes happened after large-scale Armenian provocations and Azerbaijan had to take action to prevent an imminent attack on its territory. The—

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I'll interrupt you right away, and I truly apologize, but there was no Armenian attack on Azerbaijani territory. There was an attack by Azerbaijan on the territory of Armenia.

If you truly want peace, how do you reconcile that claim with a large-scale offensive on the very territory of Armenia which, in theory, is not disputed? I find this hard to explain.

[English]

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: With regard to the border that you're referring to, Mr. Bergeron, Armenia for 30 years did not recognize that the border existed. Armenia thought that the border passed through the territory it occupied for all those years. Now Azerbaijan has come to a border that is internationally recognized but is not demarcated and delimited. What Azerbaijan has called for—a number of times—is let's sit together, let's demarcate the border and let's agree on where the border passes.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Does it have to be done with weapons?

The presidents had met a few weeks earlier to try to reach an agreement. Now, once again, Azerbaijan is taking up arms against Armenia.

Is this the way to reach a peace agreement?

[English]

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: I think we've seen it a number of times in the past, Mr. Bergeron. In 1992, when the Azerbaijan and Armenian presidents were in talks, the Azerbaijan town of Shusha was occupied during the time when the peace talks were going on—

• (1540)

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: If the Armenians did it, then we will do it too.

[English]

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: No. Absolutely not. That's not what I'm saying. However, we're not fully privy to what happened on the ground and what affected Azerbaijan security perceptions at that point. Therefore, the fact that the state acted to prevent an imminent attack... This is what the Azerbaijani government has stated. I have no reason to believe that it's otherwise.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: All right.

A few moments ago, you said in your statement that the government of Azerbaijan was ready to welcome its Armenian citizens.

Why then let them go, but prevent them from returning?

[English]

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: That's a very good question, Mr. Bergeron.

I think there is a misunderstanding there. It's not true that the Azerbaijani government is letting people out and not letting people in. I think the statement by the President of Azerbaijan was different. It was that we want to welcome the Armenian community as our citizens of the country, but if anyone is not content with the situation, we can't keep them.

That's the essence of the statement. It is not that people leave and they cannot come back. For the last two years, Mr. Bergeron, there have been people going back and forth without any problem.

I want to touch quickly on another issue. According to the November 2020 agreement, Armenia undertook to guarantee the passage and unobstructed access between the western Azerbaijani regions and Nakhchivan region. It hasn't happened. For two years Azerbaijan has been negotiating to get that access, but it hasn't been happening.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Does this authorize Azerbaijan to block the corridor and starve the population of Nagorno-Karabakh?

[English]

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: Absolutely I don't think that is being done as a retaliation for that, and I don't think there is an imminent starvation that we're seeing on the ground. I think we've seen from the media that there is access for supplies and food to the region.

But the situation is serious. It has to be resolved. It cannot stay like this. There are serious concerns for the people living there, but there are serious concerns for the Azerbaijani side as well.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you very much.

On this site, in fact.

[English]

The Chair: You're out of time.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Oh. I'll come back to it later, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bergeron.

Now we go to Mr. Davies.

Mr. Davies, you have six minutes.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To Professor Waters, you have commented in the past on problems with Canada's arms export regime and the cancelled export permit for components sold to Turkey and transferred on to Azerbaijan. Can you tell us more about your concerns about Canada's arms export regime and what you think needs to be done to ensure that we're not contributing to this or other conflicts?

Dr. Christopher Waters: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

You know, the work of this committee on those transfers was very important in having the suspensions put in place. To my knowledge, Canadian-made sensors or other weapons are not being used by Azerbaijan's forces in current skirmishes in the current very fraught version of peace that we're seeing in Azerbaijan today.

I have other concerns about Canada's arms exports, including those to Saudi Arabia and other countries, and I'd be happy to get into those if that would be of interest to the committee. I'm not sure the arms exports are an issue for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict today, but they certainly are, in broader scope, something that I think brings Canada into disrepute in terms of its international obligations under the Arms Trade Treaty.

Mr. Don Davies: Moving then to humanitarian law, can you explain what the parties in this conflict need to do in order to respect humanitarian law? In other words, are there violations right now of international human law? What are they, and what do you think ought to be done to remediate those?

Dr. Christopher Waters: Mr. Davies, through the chair, I think there are three legal frameworks, if you will.

The first is the trilateral ceasefire obligations being breached. I'm not even going to point fingers and say that they're being breached by only one party. My particular concern is with respect to the humanitarian access. For me, that breaches both international humanitarian law—or the law of armed conflict—and international human rights. When we're thinking about international human rights—for example, the rights of the child—the fact that several thousand schoolchildren in Nagorno-Karabakh can't go to school right now because their schools don't have electricity or heat raises human rights issues such as children's right to education.

With respect to international humanitarian law, given the fact that there remains an armed conflict, issues such as the killing of Armenian prisoners of war, which is being identified by Human Rights Watch amongst other international humanitarian law issues, are an ongoing concern.

There may or may not be the full return of prisoners. It seems to me that there are credible reports that prisoners have not been returned from Azerbaijan to Armenia. In the fall there was a video recording, apparently, of five Armenian prisoners of war being killed, and Human Rights Watch has reported on this.

The failure to provide the humanitarian corridor or to allow relief supplies to pass freely and unhindered is also a breach of international humanitarian law.

There might be some quibble about whether there is still an international armed conflict, but I would argue, given that there were at-

tacks by Azerbaijan on Armenia proper in the fall, that the state of international armed conflict remains, so the obligation to allow international humanitarian relief supplies to flow freely and unhindered remains an issue.

● (1545)

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

It strikes me—and I'm wondering if you could provide what the international law regime would tell us about this—that one of the underlying bases of the problem here is that you have a strong and mainly Armenian population enclave within the territory of Azerbaijan.

I have read before about the principle of self-determination. I'm just wondering what the international law tells us about a potential solution that might see the people of that region democratically select what the future for them as a people will be. Do they have that right? Do they not have that right? Does it require Azerbaijan or Armenia's agreement? What can you tell us?

Dr. Christopher Waters: In some ways, Azerbaijan's actions over recent months since the ceasefire was put in place have promoted the ethnic Armenian population's right to self-determination. Our Supreme Court, for example, said in the Quebec secession case that the self-determination right applies in “colonial” or colonial-like situations, or where an ethnic minority is unable to find self-determination internally and where rights are being abused. We've seen those kinds of rights being abused over the last couple of years, so, if anything, the right to self-determination is stronger now.

What I would argue is, let's get away from a binary territorial integrity versus self-determination issue. It has got us absolutely nowhere in terms of this conflict, as well as other conflicts in the former Soviet Union. There are literally dozens of ways in which territory can be understood to be shared, and it's important to be creative here.

Both sides should be pressured. This is where pressure is needed. Both sides should be pressured into making the concessions necessary to find a lasting and durable solution. It's not impossible to imagine a situation where Armenians and Azeris flourish in the South Caucasus together in friendship. Perhaps I'm naive. Perhaps I'm unduly optimistic, but I think it's possible.

There are numerous situations where creative solutions have been found, and what's needed here is compromise. I'm not sure a kind of black and white, binary, self-determination versus territorial integrity approach will get us very far.

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Jahangirli, quickly, for you—

The Chair: Mr. Davies, I'm afraid your six minutes are up.

Mr. Don Davies: I'm sorry. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we go to the second round of questions.

Mr. Epp, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Mr. Dave Epp (Chatham-Kent—Leamington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for coming here today.

This is one of a series of emergency meetings dealing with the humanitarian crisis. We all recognize that this is nestled within a much broader and more protracted conflict, but what we've heard today is some conflicting testimony. That's where I'd like to begin my questions.

Mr. Jahangirli, you cited the President of Azerbaijan's statement that people were free to move back and forth if they were content with the situation. This is a study to deal with the humanitarian situation. Can you describe the humanitarian situation right now in the Nagorno-Karabakh?

• (1550)

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: I'm not privy to the humanitarian situation in that region.

Mr. Dave Epp: Okay.

We've heard some testimony that it is dire. We've heard that medicine is not getting through and that there's not enough food. Some aid is getting through, but not nearly enough.

We heard testimony in an earlier panel that the Lachin corridor was open and free to movement. You're saying that it has been a more controlled movement.

What objective criteria would you suggest that this committee evaluate so we can collectively determine Canada's position on the present crisis, or would you not describe it as a crisis?

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: I believe the crisis has been imminent in that region for 30 years. It's not today. It's not a year ago. It's not five years ago. It has been a crisis for many, many years. Although the conflict was frozen, it was very much alive in terms of across the line of contact, where Armenian troops were stationed within Azerbaijani territory for 26 to 27 years.

Right now, what we're seeing is Azerbaijan, for the last two years, offering peace: that we have to sign a peace with Armenia and then we start talking to Armenian citizens. It has already started talking to Armenian citizens. Last year, many contacts took place between the local authorities of Azerbaijan and Armenians living in Karabakh region to solve their day-to-day problems like water, like electricity.... A couple of months ago, I saw in the press that the President of Azerbaijan signed a decree mandating a gas line, a special gas line, to be laid, until 2025, to supply the region with gas and electricity. This is happening. Azerbaijan is putting forward these proposals, but the peace agreement has to be signed and then it will move forward much faster.

Mr. Dave Epp: What is the present state of living conditions within Nagorno-Karabakh at the moment?

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: It's difficult for me to ascertain that.

Mr. Dave Epp: Can you describe the relationship between the control of the Lachin corridor by eco-activists, as opposed to the Azerbaijani government?

Is there a relationship between the eco-activists and the Azerbaijani government?

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: Speaking of eco-activists, I call on this committee to invite their spokesperson to testify. I've asked several committee members to have the person who is with the protesters right now to speak.

If you get a chance to speak to the people who are on the ground, you will have a much better understanding of what's going on.

Mr. Dave Epp: Thank you.

I'd like to direct my final question to Mr. Waters.

You referenced Canada's now 30-year diplomatic relationship with Armenia. We heard testimony in the earlier panel that, perhaps, the present situation nestled within the protracted conflict would be aided by Canada also establishing a relationship with Azerbaijan.

Can you comment from your perspective as to whether that would be beneficial to the peace process or not?

Dr. Christopher Waters: I think Canada should speak with Azerbaijan. It has to be with Azerbaijani government authorities because, unfortunately, there is no independent civil society in Azerbaijan right now. There's no two-track diplomacy with Azerbaijan. It's with the regime or not with the regime.

I think we should speak with the regime, absolutely, and we should encourage peace. We have leverage with Armenia in a way that we didn't even a year ago. I think we should use that leverage, as well, to encourage both sides to make necessary concessions, because concessions that are difficult to sell politically at home will be necessary on both sides.

Mr. Dave Epp: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Epp.

We now go to Dr. Fry.

You have five minutes.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Thank you very much, Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for reasonable presentations. I think both have a sense.... I feel their integrity and their sincerity in saying that there are ways we need to end this, and they're very honest about what they know is on the ground.

When we talk about conflicts, what we see is that both sides always have their story to tell, and those stories are nearly always biased. As Rob Oliphant said earlier on today, the first casualty of war is truth. We need to talk about how we can get this to happen, if there really is a blockage of humanitarian aid. We've heard some people saying there is. We've heard some people saying things are getting through and that there are videos of certain things getting through.

The bottom line I wanted to ask is this. Russia is now there in that corridor to keep peace and to allow for movement. It is my feeling.... I am the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly head of delegation. I talk to both sides every time I go to these meetings. The parliamentarians seem to be reasonable people. They are on the right side of this. They want to make changes. Yes, they each have a beef about certain things, but I think there is a willingness there for people to speak. What I feel, though, is that both sides don't want Russia there. They were always under the aegis of Russia, and they want to get away from that.

My question is this. Given that Russia is not necessarily trusted and given that the European Union, while it is there, helping with assistance.... The reality is that you need to have the OSCE, which understands the history and whose nation states surround that region and belong to that region.

Would it not be an idea for Canada, which is a member of the OSCE in good standing, to try to talk about how the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe—the OSCE—can be that force that observes and makes things happen while the agreement is ongoing?

I realize Minsk has died, because Russia is in it and because Russia continues to want to influence the region. I realize that Minsk has no chance of working now with the Ukrainian war, so we have some real, practical problems to resolve.

Is the OSCE the best body to intervene? That would include Canada. That would include all of the 57 member states, many of whom have the trust of both Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Could I get a quick response, both from Mr. Jahangirli and from the professor?

• (1555)

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: Thank you very much, Dr. Fry, for this question.

I think that you pointed to a very pertinent issue of Russia's presence in the region and the fact that both countries, both societies, want to distance themselves from Russia's influence and Russia's involvement, but there is one major distinction here. That's right; currently both countries are trying to do so, but Armenia started doing so only after Russia stopped sustaining the occupation of Azerbaijani territories.

For 26 or 27 years, Russia supported Armenia as part of the CSTO, the Collective Security Treaty Organization that Armenia and Russia are members of, to sustain the occupation, to guard Armenia's borders and to make sure that Armenia's troops stationed in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, which contributed to 700,000 people in Azerbaijan living in IDP camps....

Hon. Hedy Fry: I am aware of the history. What I'm talking about is moving forward. What I'm talking about is the best way to move forward. What is the best vehicle for doing it? Is the OSCE still the better vehicle?

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: I don't think the OSCE has leverage in the region to continue negotiating with the parties. The European Union has achieved a lot of progress in mediating the conversation,

mediating talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia. I believe that's the way both parties have seen it.

The Prague declaration last year brought Azerbaijan and Armenia to recognize their commitment to recognize each other's territorial integrity within their nationally recognized borders.

The European Union is the way to go, I believe, in that respect.

• (1600)

Hon. Hedy Fry: Is there time for the professor to give a quick-and-dirty answer, Chair?

The Chair: There are 20 to 30 seconds, Professor Waters.

Dr. Christopher Waters: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Dr. Fry, as a former member of the OSCE mission in Kosovo, I'm a big fan of the organization. I do fear that the organization has some tough days ahead of it, and while I think we should push the OSCE to continue to act as an intermediary, potentially even to have a field presence there, I agree with my colleague that the European Union has a current presence on the ground, one that it has agreed to renew.

Ms. Vartanyan from the International Crisis Group referenced the renewal of the mandate as well. We should absolutely support that. We should support any forum and every forum where we can encourage the two parties to dialogue.

If I could stress one more thing, though, it's that the fake news approach to the humanitarian corridor issue is really puzzling and problematic for me. While there's much to discuss in terms of finding a durable peace, this issue of allowing humanitarian access unfettered is a really important one and threatens civilians now.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Fry.

Thank you, Mr. Waters.

We now go to Mr. Bergeron.

You have two and a half minutes, Mr. Bergeron.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to ask Mr. Jahangirli two questions.

First of all, I was happy to hear you say that a solution to the present crisis must be found. However, on the website of your Network of Azerbaijani Canadians, the latest statement dated January 23 is about a five-point proposal submitted to Armenia with the aim of normalizing relations between the two countries.

Why don't you even mention the Lachin corridor blockage?

What efforts has Azerbaijan made so far to end the blockage of the corridor, in line with its commitments in the ceasefire agreement?

[*English*]

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: Thank you, Mr. Bergeron.

Thank you for visiting the website of our organization. Our organization's website is not a news page. We use the page to connect with our members and with our community. We don't make statements on everyday events that happen in the region.

To your second point, if you could....

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: As regards the first point, I would remind you that this statement does date from January 23.

The second question is this.

What efforts have been made by Azerbaijan so far to end the blockage of the corridor, in line with commitments in the ceasefire agreement?

[*English*]

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: The two years that this road existed with unimpeded access is a demonstration of Azerbaijan's commitment to making sure that the traffic was unimpeded—

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Right now—

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: —up until the protests began. However, in those two years, Mr. Bergeron, Armenia did not uphold its commitment. It did not honour its commitment to opening communication for Azerbaijan to access the Nakhchivan region of Azerbaijan.

We're talking about the commitment of one party. We'd have to talk about the commitment of the other party as well.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Did you wish to comment, Professor Waters?

[*English*]

Dr. Christopher Waters: I'll make one very simple comment, Mr. Bergeron, which is that there is no humanitarian crisis in Nakhchivan. I agree with my counterpart. There should be a comprehensive peace deal that includes Nakhchivan, but Nakhchivan is well supplied from Turkey.

There is simply no humanitarian issue, whereas the Lachin corridor presents a clear and pressing humanitarian issue right now.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bergeron.

We will now go to the last question.

Mr. Davies, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, thank you to both witnesses for being here. I realize these issues engage very deeply held beliefs and feelings, and I appreciate your sharing your positions with us.

In my remaining time, I'd like to give each of you about a minute to advise on what you think is the best way forward. I've heard it repeatedly, and I sense that everybody wants a just and peaceful resolution to the situation.

I'd like to give each of you a minute to tell me what advice you would share with us on how we can achieve that.

• (1605)

Mr. Anar Jahangirli: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

The way forward is to continue calling on, encouraging and urging both parties to achieve a peace deal. That will stop the illegal trafficking of land mines to Azerbaijani territories. That will facilitate traffic and access for Armenians of Karabakh to Armenia proper, as well as ensure the access of western regions between the western regions of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan region.

I disagree with the point that was made that there was no crisis in Nakhchivan and, therefore, it doesn't deserve to have access. I don't know how my colleague has established that there is no crisis there—

Mr. Don Davies: If I might, Mr. Chair, I want to make sure that there is time for Mr. Waters. That is on the previous question.

Thank you.

Go ahead, Dr. Waters.

Dr. Christopher Waters: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

On January 19, the European Parliament passed a resolution on the humanitarian consequences of the blockade in Nagorno-Karabakh, which “Urges Azerbaijan to respect and implement the trilateral statement of 9 November 2020 and immediately reopen the Lachin corridor to enable free movement and ensure access to essential goods and services”. It also urges the parties to come to a “comprehensive peace agreement”.

There are two tracks here which, to my mind, are quite simple. We have to encourage immediate access for humanitarian goods and people to travel back and forth. The idea of children being stuck in Armenia proper and unable to return to their families in Nagorno-Karabakh is simply untenable. We have to have these two tracks whereby we demand, frankly, as a player on the international stage and a country that now has a presence in the South Caucasus, that the humanitarian corridor be opened.

At the same time, we also encourage, urge and, frankly, demand that both parties continue to negotiate and come up with a durable and comprehensive peace solution. I would encourage us to do something like the European Parliament has done in that respect.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you to both of you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Davies.

With that, we can now conclude this hearing today.

Allow me to thank Mr. Jahangirli and Professor Waters. These are complicated issues, but your perspectives were very helpful. Thank you for that.

The meeting stands adjourned.

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