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Chair: Mr. Ali Ehsassi





# Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Monday, December 4, 2023

• (1220)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.)):** Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Wednesday, September 21, 2022, the committee will now resume its study of security at the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

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

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. You can speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available.

In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests for witnesses, I am informing the committee that all witnesses appearing virtually today have completed the required connection tests in advance of our meeting.

I would now like to welcome our three witnesses.

First, we have Professor Audrey Altstadt, a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She is joining us virtually. We are also grateful to have Ms. Jennifer Wistrand, the deputy director of the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, who is here in person. Last but not least, from the International Crisis Group, we have Mr. Zaur Shiriyev, who is an analyst for the South Caucasus division.

Each of you will be provided with five minutes for your opening remarks, after which we will proceed to questions from the members. Once you are getting close to the timeline, I will hold this up, which means we're asking you or cajoling you to wrap it up in 10 to 15 seconds.

All that being said, given that Ms. Wistrand is here in person with us, we will start with her. Then we will go to Professor Altstadt and then Mr. Shiriyev.

Professor Wistrand, you have five minutes for your opening remarks.

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand (Deputy Director, Kennan Institute, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, As an Individual):** Dear members of Parliament, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today to discuss matters related to your ongoing study of security at the borders between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In my opening statement, I will briefly outline some points that I believe are important. I would be happy to go into more detail

about these points, as well as other points that are of interest to you, during the question-and-answer session that follows.

Since Azerbaijan's September 19 military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh, which resulted in the de facto government of the breakaway region surrendering, Azerbaijan's and Armenia's leaders, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia, have been seriously discussing the conditions necessary to establish a durable peace between their two states.

Long-term peace is possible. However, it's premature to think that a comprehensive peace agreement can or should be developed at this time. A series of pre-negotiations or partial peace agreements that focus on specific security, humanitarian and other issues would lay the necessary groundwork for the two sides to reach the point of being able to develop a comprehensive peace agreement that could resonate both among the countries' elected officials and among everyday Azerbaijanis and Armenians, who have been taught to believe, over the last 30 years, that the "other" is their existential enemy.

Some of the security, humanitarian and other issues that need to be addressed in the preliminary agreements that are developed are the exchange of all Azerbaijani and Armenian prisoners; mutual recognition of all territorial boundaries between Azerbaijan and Armenia; support for Armenians who left Nagorno-Karabakh as refugees following the September 19 military offensive and who would like to integrate into Armenia; support for Azerbaijanis who became internally displaced persons, or IDPs, following the 1992-94 war and who would like to return to Nagorno-Karabakh; protections for Armenians who would like to remain in, or return to, Nagorno-Karabakh, i.e., ethnic, religious and linguistic minority rights; protection of Armenian cultural heritage sites in Nagorno-Karabakh; and shared official terminology for all administrative units in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Additionally, a mutually acceptable mediator is needed. Between 1992 and 2022, the OSCE Minsk Group, which was co-chaired by the United States, France and Russia, regularly met with its Azerbaijani and Armenian counterparts; however, the group's successes were limited. For example, the entity that succeeded in brokering the ceasefire between Azerbaijan and Armenia in November 2020 was not the OSCE Minsk Group, but rather Russia. Russia was the only country that subsequently sent peacekeeping troops to the region. Since 2022, the European Council, under the leadership of Charles Michel, has begun to negotiate between President Aliyev and Prime Minister Pashinyan.

Unfortunately, there is no one group, council or country that is best placed to mediate. The United States, France and Russia have large Armenian diaspora populations, which renders them potentially biased in the eyes of Azerbaijan. France's decision to increase its military support for Armenia in the wake of the September 19 military offensive would seem to justify Azerbaijan's concerns.

Armenia and Russia have historically had a strong relationship. This has led Azerbaijan to question the latter's ability to be an impartial arbiter. However, the Russian peacekeeping troops' failure to maintain the Lachin corridor between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, beginning in December of last year, combined with their failure to prevent the September 19 military offensive, has prompted Armenia to question Russia's interventions as well.

Armenia's and Turkey's lack of diplomatic relations, in the face of Azerbaijan's and Turkey's strong relationship, eliminates the possibility of a Turkish mediator. Georgia is home to both minority Azerbaijani and minority Armenian populations, and for 30 years, it has served as neutral ground for Azerbaijanis and Armenians who have wanted to bridge their differences. Georgia could negotiate between its neighbours, but its unresolved territorial disputes with Russia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia might influence its perspective.

Canada could play the mediator role. Canadian diplomats have the standing and skills to do so. However, like the United States, France and Russia, Canada has a sizable Armenian diaspora population. Canada might be better placed to contribute humanitarian aid and development support to Armenian refugees and Azerbaijani IDPs in both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

● (1225)

The sooner countries are perceived to cease favouring one side over the other in this conflict, the sooner Azerbaijan and Armenia will be ready to develop a comprehensive peace agreement that can hold.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Wistrand.

We will now go to Professor Altstadt.

Professor Altstadt, you have five minutes for your opening remarks.

**Ms. Audrey Altstadt (Professor of History, University of Massachusetts Amherst, As an Individual):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is a pleasure to be here. Thank you for the invitation.

Ladies and gentlemen, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh that we are discussing now is primarily a problem of the 20th century. It is specifically a result of boundary delineation in the Soviet Union by its early leaders, including Stalin.

In these introductory remarks, I will make three major points.

Number one, both Armenians and Azerbaijanis consider the Karabakh region to be historic patrimony and, therefore, each rejects the claims of the other. The region has had a mixed population

for centuries, and cultural monuments and cemeteries of both peoples exist there.

Number two, the initial settlement in the early 1920s concerning conflicting claims to the area known now as Nagorno—or mountainous—Karabakh took place in the early twenties as part of a larger territorial dispute over three regions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, dating from their period of independence from 1918 to 1920. Under Soviet rule, the three regions were distributed between the two republics.

Going from west to east, these were, first, Nakhchivan, in the far west, bordering Turkey. That went to Azerbaijan. Next, the area of Zangezur, now part of Armenia, was awarded to Armenia, thus separating Nakhchivan from the rest of Azerbaijan. Finally, the mountainous region in Karabakh was the subject of the creation of a Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous oblast—or region—known as the NKAO. It was created inside Azerbaijan, but it provided cultural autonomy for the local Armenians living there.

All parties were unhappy with this arrangement, but it was created, like other autonomous regions, in particular, I believe, to ensure that local parties would contend against each other rather than fighting against Moscow.

Number three is that the first Karabakh war, which took place from 1988 until 1994, was preceded by a Karabakh movement in Armenia. The leaders of that movement took the opportunity that they perceived under Gorbachev to attempt to get the NKAO transferred from Azerbaijan to Armenia. Demonstrations in Yerevan were followed by local fighting in the Karabakh region, and then targeted killings and evictions of populations occurred in both republics. With the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. in December 1991, fighting escalated and became officially a war between two sovereign states rather than an internal Soviet conflict.

By the ceasefire of 1994, Armenian forces had successfully taken control of the Soviet creation of the NKAO, as well as the area between it and the Armenian border to the west, a swath of territory from the NKAO south to the Iranian border and some territory to the east. The total amount held by Armenian forces was 14% of Azerbaijan's territory. Azerbaijani forces were defeated, obviously, and humiliated. Sources agree that Azerbaijan lost the larger number of the 30,000 fatalities of this long conflict and about three-quarters of the one million displaced civilians.

Despite these catastrophic losses, Azerbaijanis said privately, if not publicly, that western governments and human rights groups did not raise a cry at that time about displaced Azerbaijanis or about ethnic cleansing, nor did they provide aid to Azerbaijan for the IDPs at that time, when Azerbaijan was still a poor country.

Thereafter, every party on Azerbaijan's political spectrum—and certainly every individual I encountered—wanted to take back that land, get citizens back to their homes and restore some of the national dignity lost in that war. Azerbaijan was going to try to take that back. It was predictable. It was only a matter of time.

With post-Soviet independence, the Azerbaijani government forged alliances with Turkey and Israel, both of which sold it weapons systems. Turkey also provided extensive military training over years, and Azerbaijan had the oil revenues to pay for it all.

• (1230)

Today, governments and international agencies raise human rights considerations about Azerbaijan retaking Nagorno-Karabakh, as they should and must. At the same time, western governments and agencies know the Azerbaijani government has an appalling human rights record toward its Azerbaijani citizens. However, western entities continue to do business with Baku and put human rights and democracy on the back burner.

Azerbaijanis in opposition to the government of Ilham Aliyev will say that the west has a double standard. It cares more about the repression of Armenians than of Azerbaijanis under the same government. Even human rights activists inside Azerbaijan don't see hope coming from the west.

I would like to raise the possibility of highlighting all the human rights abuses taking place in the region, thereby giving hope to human rights defenders of all nationalities.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We will now go to Mr. Shiriyev.

Mr. Shiriyev, you have five minutes for your opening remarks.

• (1235)

**Mr. Zaur Shiriyev (Analyst, South Caucasus, International Crisis Group):** Good afternoon, Chairman Ehsassi and distinguished members of the committee. I am deeply honoured to have this opportunity to address you and to discuss the ongoing issues between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Both nations' leaders are making positive public statements, signalling readiness for a peace treaty, suggesting that an agreement is near. The major stumbling blocks in the negotiations are now much less prevalent, particularly since Azerbaijan's retaking of Nagorno-Karabakh seems to bring an end to the decades-long conflict over the enclave. However, while Karabakh was the most contentious issue between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it is not the only one. Other issues like connectivity, border demarcation and delimitation remain to be addressed, requiring the resumption of talks.

First of all, although both sides indicate readiness to sign a peace agreement soon, talks have not yet been resumed. While we cannot claim that there is no process—as both sides are exchanging drafts of the peace agreement, with Armenia having shared its response to the draft with Baku on November 21—there is an expectation of a response from Baku. This exchange keeps the peace momentum going, but further actions are required. The foreign ministers responsible for the agreement's details need to engage more visibly.

As we know, Baku's decreasing interest in western negotiation platforms is noticeable. It prefers bilateral talks without third party mediation, especially after tensions with Washington and the European Union. A strong push is necessary to resume talks and finalize the peace agreement.

Second, connectivity has been a contentious issue, sparking various speculations that Azerbaijan could forcibly establish connectivity through Armenian territory. Baku has repeatedly denied such accusations. At present, it appears that progress is being made in defining the principles of connectivity, which include respect for sovereignty, jurisdiction, equality and reciprocity. These could be integrated into the peace agreement, but an interstate agreement is necessary to work on connectivity and its practical implementation.

Furthermore, regional players' interests cannot be overlooked. In the Azerbaijan-Armenia talks, external influences often complicate matters. Russia, interpreting the 2020 ceasefire agreement, seeks control over Armenian connectivity routes, which Yerevan opposes as infringing on its sovereignty. Meanwhile, Iran opposes Azerbaijan-Armenia connectivity through Armenia's southern borders.

Another issue is the unresolved security concerns over the state border, which is not demarcated and remains a real front line with numerous military positions, often only metres apart. While it is understood that border delimitation and demarcation will be a long-term process, agreeing on principles, resolving contentious issues such as enclaves and exclaves, and reaching consensus on procedural matters and the use of maps is crucial.

While the focus on these key issues is pivotal, I also think that, before and during the process of the signing of a peace agreement, more steps must be taken by the respective governments to address the humanitarian and other issues. A starting point is the release of the detainees held by both sides—two Azerbaijanis in Armenia and over 30 Armenians in Azerbaijan. Within this framework, prioritizing the issue of missing persons should be central to the collaboration between the sides.

Another humanitarian issue is the problem of land mines. Land mines affect both sides to various degrees, but it is more severe in Azerbaijan, where a majority of mines prevent the safe return of displaced Azerbaijanis to their homes. In this respect, both sides need to take action. The first action should be joining the Ottawa convention. At the same time, the international community should offer significant international aid as an incentive for joining this convention.

The last issue is that, when discussing this peace agreement, there is also a need to end the diplomatic, media and court wars between the sides. Signing a peace agreement is crucial, but continuing diplomatic and media wars is problematic. Ending ongoing court cases and pledging to not initiate lawsuits against each other at the state level should be integral to the peace agreement.

Last, there's a need for peace incentives for both sides from the international community. Given the region's unfamiliarity with peace as a pathway to prosperity, the initial step should be to re-define peace as prosperity for both populations by associating it with financial assistance. Very clearly, there is a need, which might be organizing a donor conference upon the signing of the peace agreement.

• (1240)

My final point is that we should acknowledge the conflict's long historical background, which still resonates in the thinking of the parties today. The solution will require a graduated series of steps, beginning with a peace agreement. This agreement should ensure most people feel safe in assuming that another war is not an option, marking the first step towards peaceful coexistence in a regionally sovereign and secure environment.

Thank you, Mr. Chair and distinguished members of the committee.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Shiriyev.

We'll now go to the members for questions.

We'll start with MP Chong.

You have four minutes.

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

My first question is for Ms. Wistrand.

We know approximately 100,000 ethnic Armenians fled Nagorno-Karabakh. You made reference in your opening comments to the fact that some want to remain in Armenia and some want to return to Nagorno-Karabakh. You also made reference to internally displaced persons.

Out of the 100,000 ethnic Armenians, how many want to remain in Armenia to settle, and how many want to return to Nagorno-Karabakh? Do we have any sense of those numbers?

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** It's a very good question. I don't know, personally. To be honest, it would be too soon, at this time, to determine that.

I come from having looked at the internally displaced persons situation in Azerbaijan. It has been 30 years now. I spent two years in the country about 15 years ago, and I went back with the World Bank multiple times. Thirty years on, we saw people talking about wanting to return, but whether or not they actually would.... I think it's comparable to the Armenian situation.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Is your reference to internally displaced persons in Azerbaijan to ethnic Azerbaijanis?

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** That's correct.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** How many people who identify as Azerbaijani do you estimate want to return to Nagorno-Karabakh?

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** In terms of numbers, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimates, as of the end of last year, that there were 659,000 Azerbaijanis who are IDPs.

Again, if you poll people, or just ask them, as I've done, many will say, "Yes, I want to return", but I think that's a generational issue too. I'm sure that, if you were personally displaced, you'd have a greater chance of wanting to return than you would if you were a child who was born, let's say, on the outskirts of Baku and never knew Karabakh.

I think it's very tricky when you ask someone...emotionally versus what they would actually do.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Do all of those 659,000 people view themselves as internally displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh?

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** It would be either from Karabakh or.... As mentioned in Professor Altstadt's comments, there were seven regions adjacent to Karabakh, which Armenia also occupied—that 14% of the territory.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** It's just Nagorno-Karabakh. Okay.

What is the Republic of Armenia's position on those ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh who wish to settle permanently in the Republic of Armenia?

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** My understanding is that they want to do everything they can to integrate people who would like to stay in Armenia.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Professor Altstadt, I have a question for you.

You mentioned, in your opening remarks, that western governments continue to do business with Baku.

Is that a reference to the deals western governments, particularly European governments, have been making with Baku to increase natural gas exports from Azerbaijan, in order to displace Russian natural gas in western Europe?

**Ms. Audrey Altstadt:** Yes, sir, that is one of the many areas where western entities—private companies, governments and international organizations—continue to do business with Baku. They will all say that energy security is among their main pillars for dealing with the Azerbaijani government, along with other types of security. They will also tell you the third pillar is human rights and democracy. It has been my contention that this is the short leg of the tripod.

Yes, the German and EU gas deals are among the most recent.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have no further questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll now go to MP Zuberi.

You have three minutes.

**Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

If Dr. Fry is having—

**The Chair:** She can't start. She is having connectivity issues.

**Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.):** Am I still having connectivity issues? I don't know.

**The Chair:** Yes, that is what I've been advised, Dr. Fry, unfortunately.

**Hon. Hedy Fry:** Okay.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry about that.

Go ahead, Mr. Zuberi.

**Mr. Sameer Zuberi:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to ask the witnesses what the current situation is for ethnic Armenian refugees who have migrated and fled the Nagorno-Karabakh region into Armenia.

I'll put this question to Ms. Wistrand, given that she has expertise in IDP—internally displaced people—and migration. If other witnesses want to add anything, please do so.

• (1245)

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** Thank you.

Again, I haven't been on the ground in Armenia, so I can't say over the past two months what has taken place there. From what I've followed by looking at UNHCR and others, the government has done a very good job of taking care of people as best they can. People are not living in tents. They've been taken into homes or other types of settlements. It's the longer-term integration that's going to be a difficulty.

**Mr. Sameer Zuberi:** Thank you. I appreciate that comment and testimony.

My next question relates to ICJ and the ruling between Azerbaijan and Armenia. How is it being enforced? What role do the different actors have in this?

With respect to the ruling being respected by both sides, would any of the witnesses be able to comment on that?

**Ms. Audrey Altstadt:** I'm sorry, but what exactly is the ruling? I'm not familiar with what you're referring to.

**Mr. Sameer Zuberi:** I guess if it's something that you're not familiar with, I'll go to another point.

I'm sorry. I was a bit thrown off by the order. I was expecting to go third.

Ms. Wistrand, you said that in terms of the groups that were in the Minsk Group—

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, MP Zuberi, but you have 50 seconds.

**Mr. Sameer Zuberi:** Can you talk about Georgia and how it would be a positive actor with respect to mediation?

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** Thank you.

I think they could be a good mediator. They have essentially been a de facto mediator between the two countries for the past 30 years. You also have ethnic Armenian and ethnic Azerbaijani populations who have been long-term residents in the country and have peacefully co-existed there. I think it creates the context in which Georgia could do that.

Its biggest issue is the fact that 20% of its land is occupied by Russia, so it puts it in a precarious position.

**Mr. Sameer Zuberi:** Mr. Chair, I will give the time back to the committee.

**The Chair:** Thank you, MP Zuberi.

We will next go to MP Bergeron.

You have four minutes, sir.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Wistrand, does the fact that Russia occupies 20% of Georgia's land explain Georgia's recent refusal to act as a mediator or host mediation talks?

[*English*]

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** Is the question about Georgia and why it's refusing to act in terms of mediation with respect to its territory?

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Does the fact that Russia occupies 20% of Georgia's land explain Georgia's recent refusal to act as a mediator or host peace talks?

[*English*]

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** Georgia is a complicated situation. As I mentioned, it has ongoing disputes with Russia with respect to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which comprise 20% of its territory. There's been a discussion of the 3+3 agreement between Turkey, Russia and Iran, and Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. Georgia has thus far, with the two meetings that have taken place, recused itself and not wanted to participate. I think that is because it feels it should not have to be subject to Russia by being a party to a six-party talk when Russia is not freely negotiating with it.

I think Georgia could effectively work as a mediator with Azerbaijan and Armenia. Again, it's going to constantly have that pressure of, if it missteps, whether Russia is going to somehow...because there's already a creeping occupation going on with Russia.

• (1250)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Ms. McPherson and I had the privilege of travelling to Armenia recently and meeting with refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh. All the people we spoke with wanted the same thing, to return to Nagorno-Karabakh. Until that happens, three issues really concern me.

First, how do we protect cultural heritage sites until a peace deal is struck?

Second, how do we prevent these people's homes from being occupied, which would make their return impossible?

Third and finally, how do we help those refugees briefly return home to retrieve important documents or pets they left behind in the rush to leave?

[English]

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** These are all excellent points.

With respect to cultural sites, I think that both sides, Azerbaijan and Armenia, would be in agreement that cultural sites need to be protected. For the past 30 years Azerbaijanis have wanted to make sure that their cultural sites in Shusha and other areas are protected, so I think protecting Armenian cultural sites would be absolutely something that would be upheld.

With respect to residents being able to return and collect their belongings, again, I think Azerbaijan would want that, because they didn't have that when that happened, as Professor Altstadt mentioned, 30 years ago when 659,000 people were pushed out. They were not able to go back in to collect their belongings, so it should be emphasized that, yes, Armenians should be allowed to go back and collect their belongings and that should be part of any type of negotiated peace agreement, certainly with documents.

The trickier question is about housing. Azerbaijanis were forced out 30 years ago. A lot of them would like to return. Now you have Armenians who would like to return. What are you going to do when you have two sets of people claiming the right to live in the same place? That's where a peace settlement is going to take a much longer time to adjudicate, but on the immediacy of documents—absolutely—and of cultural sites, those can be more quickly attested to.

**The Chair:** Thank you. I'm afraid you're out of time, MP Bergeron.

[Translation]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Did you take into account the fact that I had to ask my first question twice?

[English]

**The Chair:** We're now at four minutes and 12 seconds. There are four minutes for each member.

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Yes, but I had to repeat my first question because it wasn't understood by the witness.

**The Chair:** We are very short on time.

Go ahead, MP Oliphant.

**Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I'll give one minute of our time.

**Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP):** Yes. I was just going to suggest that perhaps there would be unanimous consent among the committee members to allow Mr. Bergeron to ask his question.

**The Chair:** Okay. You have one more minute, Mr. Bergeron.

[Translation]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** I want to thank my fellow members. That is very kind.

For a while now, Azerbaijan has been referring to southern Armenia as western Azerbaijan, and that narrative is becoming more prominent.

Is it likely to complicate peace talks? Does it suggest that Azerbaijan could ultimately seize that territory?

[English]

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** I apologize for not getting my earpiece up quickly enough with the first question.

Yes, discussion of a greater western Azerbaijan could complicate peace agreements. However, I think we have to remember, if we're going to look at both sides and be fair to both sides, that Armenia has for a long time talked about a greater Armenia, which would extend not just into Azerbaijan but also into different states.

Again, in terms of mediation, that's where Georgia could be very effective in cautioning Azerbaijan by saying, "Don't talk about a western Azerbaijan. Let's establish where the boundaries are, but let's not expand beyond what boundaries we think are appropriate."

**The Chair:** Thank you.

MP McPherson, go ahead for four minutes.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for being here virtually and in person. This is an important study for this committee to be undertaking. Unfortunately, I was not in Armenia with you. I deeply wish I had been, but I wasn't able to attend. It was my colleague Ms. Mathysen who was there instead.

I do think it is a study that would be very useful if this committee could visit. As we look at the role Canada can play going forward in this conflict, Canada has shown.... We have a new embassy. There is some diplomatic work being done.

I'd like to get a sense of what more Canada can do, and I'd like to focus on the humanitarian and the diplomatic roles.

First of all, I would ask this. We have heard that a financial contribution of \$3.9 million is being used to address the humanitarian crisis resulting from the conflict. Is that sufficient? If you could comment on what is resulting from that, it would be great.

I would like to start with Ms. Wistrand and then go to our colleagues online.

• (1255)

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** I want to commend Canada again for taking an interest in the situation and wanting to commit resources.



I can't comment personally on how the \$3.9 million is being spent. All I can recommend, as I mentioned at the end of my remarks, is that I do think there has been a tendency for countries to pick sides with respect to this. If Canada is coming in as a new player, I would say the most immediate need is to deal with the humanitarian crisis among the Armenians who have arrived in Armenia. I think that is one set of circumstances.

However, having observed for 15 or 20 years the Azerbaijani IDP situation, we know that some of them are still living in circumstances that are not the greatest. If Canada were to extend an arm and say it's not a humanitarian situation anymore and that it's a long-term development situation, I think we could look at both the circumstances from that and ask, for those who do want to return to Karabakh, what the best way to do that would be and what type of immediate, person-to-person interactions are needed.

I think there are multiple angles, but discrete projects would be pursued.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Ms. Altstadt, you spoke about the appalling human rights record and how that is being used against the Azerbaijanis who are advocating for human rights. Perhaps you could touch on that as well in your answer on Canada's financial contribution.

**Ms. Audrey Altstadt:** Like Ms. Wistrand, I wouldn't be able to assess the amount of money and where it would go, what's needed. I would suggest very careful oversight and accountability naturally, given the situation.

It would be very difficult to couple the kind of aid that we're talking about here for displaced people—technically, people who fled Azerbaijan into Armenia and are therefore considered refugees, and the formerly internally displaced population left in the eastern part of Azerbaijan, who formerly had lived in either Nagorno-Karabakh or the surrounding territories. It would be hard to couple that aid I think with some of the human rights issues, because the human rights issues really are a matter of observation of the justice system, of policing, of appeals for these people in terms of access to visitors and so on. I think that they're not really closely related.

The idea is that western governments should, and I'm advocating that they should, pay attention to both of these kinds of potential repressions by, in this case, the Azerbaijani government, but by governments in general.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** I would just point out that our feminist international assistance policy does have pillars that talk about justice and some of the human rights issues. Then when we look at a feminist foreign policy, a feminist international assistance policy, I do think that there is some overlap on that and Canada can play a meaningful role.

I wonder if I could just very quickly ask—

**The Chair:** I'm terribly sorry. You're over four minutes, MP McPherson.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** We'll go to the second round with three minutes, for you, MP Epp.

The floor is yours.

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

Thank you to the witnesses.

On lasting peace, durable peace, I'm going to start with you, Ms. Wistrand. It seems that over the past 100 years whichever party has had the upper hand has obviously dominated the territory and then caused flows of migration. You outlined in your testimony certain steps, at least interim steps, to try to get to the point of discussing lasting peace.

I have a two-part question. When was the last time there was either stability or lasting peace?

I know there was stability perhaps in the Soviet time period, but was that enforced stability by a stronger third hand?

Was there a pre-1920s period of stability, and what was that based on, territory or peoples? Will a durable peace come about from a picking of a time...because the mass migrations forced IDPs from both sides of the conflicts?

I'm looking for a vision of lasting peace. What will be the basis of it: territory or people? By "people", I mean "ethnicity"? I recognize that both of those are intertwined.

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** Yes, that's a very good question and a very difficult question.

In terms of what I think would actually achieve a lasting peace, I'll give you something from my personal experience spending two years living in the country from 2006 to 2008, when I was doing research for my Ph.D. dissertation, spending time in school and literally sitting in history, civics and constitution classes. This is on the Azerbaijani side.

You have the problem now, as you have in any place in the world, where you have two populations that have learned to "other" the other. Without undoing that, which takes human-to-human contact, you're not going to achieve lasting peace. If you're going to have people coming back and living together, obviously first you have to have security rights guaranteed, so that nothing is going to happen. Second, you have to get people to want to trust one another again.

Yes, the first step will be delimiting the borders. Second is creating security, but third, you have to have programs in place like exchanges between young people, getting them to trust one another. I truly believe that's what you're going to have to do to achieve lasting peace.

• (1300)

**Mr. Dave Epp:** I have a follow-up to that, then. Would that "learning to live together" as two ethnicities fall more within the present-day territorial distinction of Azerbaijan versus Armenia? I'm assuming there are fewer Azeris in Armenia, save the enclave of Nakhchivan. Is most of the work going to have to occur inside of present-day Azerbaijan, or will it be in both countries?

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** Given that they have social media and the fact that young people in either country can be accessing and communicating with anyone anywhere, I think it's going to take place in both countries. I really do think it's a whole-of-society perspective.

Just to go back to your earlier question of when did they have a period when they had peace, I would defer to my colleague, Professor Altstadt, the historian. However, if you do look back, as she's underscored—and I've looked at maps going back 150 years, produced by German, British, American, all these different types of cartographers—if you look at the place names, the majority are Armenian, but there are parts where you do have standing Azerbaijani communities.

The two groups have historically lived together in the past, and they weren't warring. Therefore, when you had this delimitation in the 20th century of borders and the hardening of ethnic identities, I think that laid the preconditions for the problems we have.

I do think it is more person to person, but it's not just going to take place on the Azerbaijani side. It's going to be on the Armenian side as well.

**Mr. Dave Epp:** Given more time, I would have asked Ms. Altstadt as well, but I can't.

**The Chair:** Thank you, MP Epp.

We next go to MP Oliphant.

You have three minutes.

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank all of the witnesses. I need an hour with each of you.

Ms. Wistrand, you raised eight issues that I found very helpful. Every one of them would take an hour, so I want to focus on a couple of them.

You talked about the exchange of prisoners. Does Armenia have prisoners of war from Azerbaijan? Does Azerbaijan have prisoners of war? They, I understand, sometimes call them criminals because of previous offences. What is the state of the prisoners?

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** It's a very good question. The most I know is by looking at Red Cross or other documents that come out.

My understanding is that both sides do have some prisoners. As to whether they call them criminals, I would say that more call them prisoners, but my understanding is that it's both sides.

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** On the issues of return, some refugees, as Mr. Chong said, will want very much to return from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh. There are some 600,000 Azerbaijanis who feel that they want to return. In your sense, is this possible? Is there an ability for Azerbaijan to manage all of that complexity?

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** It's very good question. I think it would be extremely difficult.

If you go back to the Soviet period—which, again, my colleague Professor Altstadt, the historian, would underscore as well—and if you look at the North Caucasus during the World War II period, the

Soviets manipulated those borders and moved populations, populations that are still trying to come back and peacefully integrate.

You would have a similar situation with two populations claiming the same territory and literally sometimes the same home. As much as it would be wonderful if the two countries could work it out, it would be helpful to have a mediating group.

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** When it comes to the mediator, you mentioned that nobody is working out right now—people are biased. Do you have any out-of-the-box thinking on a mediator, someone who is not in the EU, someone who does not have a large Armenian diaspora, someone completely out of this? Could it be Norway or...?

I'm just trying to think. Should we be trying to find someone who is an unusual player in this?

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** Yes, that's a very good question. I was racking my brain for that as well. I was thinking, would Australia perhaps be...?

Again, from having been in Azerbaijan, the last time I was there I saw some Japanese development projects that were taking place. Could Japan somehow be positioned? I don't know. Thus far, so many countries have either lined up on one side or the other or, again, because of the percentages of the diaspora populations, it makes it very tricky for either side to have perceived neutrality.

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** This is my last question, and anybody can answer it. Nakhchivan, should we be watching this? Someone talked about connectivity earlier. Is that connectivity at risk at all? Is there potential conflict there, or should we relax about that?

● (1305)

**The Chair:** Be very brief.

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** Again, I know that a lot of people have talked about the concern about a western Azerbaijan and Zangezur corridor, and I defer to my colleagues and the other witnesses. I personally don't see Azerbaijan wanting to do a military incursion. They've spent 30 years with people occupying their territory and not respecting international law. I don't see why they would then want to flip it and be the....

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We now go to MP Bergeron.

You have a minute and a half.

[*Translation*]

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

Since the 2020 war, Azerbaijan has carried out a number of incursions into Armenia's sovereign territory. I realize we are talking about something rather esoteric, since the border between the two countries isn't well demarcated. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan has used military offensives to encroach on what would be Armenian territory. Just today, a clash at the border resulted in the death of an Armenian soldier.

Do incidents like that make the situation more complicated and further diminish the possibility of a negotiated peace between the two countries?

[English]

**Dr. Jennifer Wistrand:** Absolutely. Again, as was pointed out by Professor Altstadt and I would concur, Azerbaijan has felt humiliated for the past 30 years that the international community did not come to its defence and has now seen a double standard, but you're absolutely right. It doesn't help its situation if it's now going to encroach on Armenian territory, let alone kill soldiers or civilians, so obviously it complicates peace.

[Translation]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Thank you.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Bergeron.

The last question goes to MP McPherson.

You have a minute and a half.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I haven't had an opportunity yet to ask Mr. Shiryev a question.

I was going to just put one to him about the area of Nagorno-Karabakh and its adjacent regions being heavily mined. We know that mines have been put down for a very long time. We also know that there has been some movement with Azerbaijan and Armenia sharing the location of some of those mines.

What else is happening with regard to that? Is there a role that Canada can play? We have historically played a leading role on land mine removal.

**Mr. Zaur Shiryev:** Land mines are a serious and important issue between Azerbaijan and Armenia. What can Canada do? Azerbaijan has a reluctance to join the Ottawa convention, claiming and reasoning that this is not going to bring substantial international attention and financial incentives for demining initiatives.

My recommendation, which may also be defined as a Crisis Group recommendation, is that, first, there should be more recommendations to both sides to join the Ottawa convention. With Canada being at the forefront and having a lead position on the demining issue, it can also offer substantial support. Defining this zone will also bring international attention for demining.

How many mines? Azerbaijan asserts that there are 1.5 million land mines. Some of the mines have actually been there since the nineties, but there are also newer mines that have been put there. I think that substantial international attention to this humanitarian issue is important.

At the same time, there is a common issue at the Azerbaijan-Armenian border, which is heavily mined. This actually makes it less possible for the people to be involved in agricultural work, which is an important source of income. That's why this could be an effective confidence-building measure between Azerbaijan and Armenia, if they decide to bring up this issue and work together.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, MP McPherson.

I'm afraid we're going to have to conclude this hour of questioning, but I know I speak on behalf of all our members when I thank Dr. Wistrand, Professor Altstadt and Mr. Shiryev. We're very grateful for your perspectives and expertise. Once our report is done, we'll certainly be sure to send you a copy.

Thank you very much for your time.

With that, the meeting stands adjourned.

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