



Azerbaijan Uses Prohibited White Phosphorus Weapons in Nagorno-Karabakh Forests, Statement from 50 NGOs in Armenia

LOS ANGELES (November 5, 2020) -- On Monday, November 4, 50 NGOs in Armenia released a [statement](#) condemning Azerbaijan's use of white phosphorus weapons in Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh). The organizations state that the "[o]ngoing developments continue to threaten any form of life in the region. They appeal to international environmental organizations to condemn the use of white phosphorus and call for the protection of valuable ecosystems, species populations, and genetic resources in Artsakh from ecocide, defined as the intentional destruction of large areas of the natural environment.

"As per credible reports and collected data, comprised by the Human Rights Defender of Armenia, Azerbaijani military forces have used white phosphorus munitions containing elements of chemical weapons in the primary forests of Artsakh," the organizations state. "As video evidence shows, these weapons are being used in an attempt to burn down forests where civilians are taking shelter from Azerbaijan's attacks."

The statement further expresses deep concern for the environmental repercussions of the use of white phosphorus, including danger to the critically endangered Persian (Caucasian) Leopard which migrates through Artsakh, and the destruction of primary forests, which are among the most biodiverse forests in the region. Further, "[t]he usage of white phosphorus munitions by Azerbaijani forces in those forests will not only destroy valuable ecosystems and habitats and put threatened species at the risk of extinction, but will contaminate rivers and underground waters for years, thus turning into a major threat of regional scale for all the people and wildlife living in the region," the statement warns.

The use of banned white phosphorus weapons is a gross violation of international environmental conventions such as the Bern Convention, and Nagoya Protocol to the Helsinki and Rotterdam Conventions, which both Armenia and Azerbaijan have verified, and their use against civilian populations violates international humanitarian laws.

A fact sheet with background information and accompanying sources is attached.

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Background of the attacks launched on September 27, 2020

On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan launched an offensive into Nagorno-Karabakh (known as Artsakh in Armenian) and Armenia. Armenia and Artsakh have a combined population of 3 million, while Azerbaijan has 10 million inhabitants. Artsakh retains *de facto* [control](#) over its territory. Shortly after the attack was launched, it was [reported](#) that Azerbaijan restricted internet access for its population. International journalists were [banned](#) from entering Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan ranks 168th out of 180 countries in the [world press freedom index](#).

Artsakh's capital [Stepanakert](#), as well as surrounding civilian settlements, have been under [heavy bombardment](#) since the attacks were launched on September 27. The Artsakh Human Rights Ombudsman has [reported](#) 45 civilian deaths and 141 wounded in Artsakh as of October 31. On October 8, Azerbaijan [targeted](#) the city of Shushi and [struck](#) the Holy Savior Cathedral, damaging it and [injuring](#) several international reporters. Amnesty International has [confirmed](#) the use of illegal cluster bombs by Azerbaijan, a finding [reinforced](#) by Human Rights Watch. Genocide Watch [considers](#) the threat to the civilian population of Artsakh to constitute a genocide emergency. On October 30, [reports](#) emerged on Azerbaijan's use of white phosphorus. On November 2, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights [warned](#) of possible war crimes being committed in Artsakh.

Attacks were also [launched](#) on the internationally recognized borders of Armenia (not Artsakh). A number of international news outlets have [reported](#) on Turkey's involvement, including its [deployment](#) of Syrian mercenaries to Azerbaijan, and overall military [support](#) and provision of military expertise to Azerbaijan. At least two of Turkey's F-16 planes were [reported](#) at Ganja International Airport in Azerbaijan. As of October 29, 1166 Armenian and Artsakh soldiers have been [confirmed](#) killed. Azerbaijan does not release [information](#) about its military casualties.

A brief background on the Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) Republic

Artsakh is an integral part of historic Armenia that was arbitrarily carved out in 1921 by Joseph Stalin and placed under Soviet Azerbaijani administration, but with autonomous status. Artsakh has never been part of an independent Azerbaijani state. During seven decades of Soviet Azerbaijani rule, the Armenian population was subjected to discriminatory policies aimed at its removal. Even after these efforts to force Armenians from their land, Artsakh's population in 1988 was over 80% Armenian. Following a peaceful demand by Artsakh's legislative body to reunite the region with Armenia in 1988, Azerbaijan launched an ethnic cleansing campaign against individuals of Armenian descent with pogroms against civilians in Azerbaijan, including its capital Baku, and Sumgait. On September 2, 1991, the people declared independence from the Soviet Union and became the Autonomous Region of Nagorno-Karabakh. On December 10, 1991, Nagorno-Karabakh held an independence referendum in which 82% of all voters participated and 99% voted for independence. In response, Azerbaijan launched an all-out war against the region. Since the ceasefire agreement of 1994, Artsakh has reaffirmed its commitment to a peaceful resolution of the conflict.