

## **Urgent Call for Action**

### **In Response to The Destruction and Vandalism of Armenian Churches**

To: Honorable Karima Bennoune  
UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights  
c/o Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights  
CH-1211 Geneva 10  
Switzerland  
Email: [srculturalrights@ohchr.org](mailto:srculturalrights@ohchr.org)

To: Honorable Ahmed Shaheed  
UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief  
c/o Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights  
CH-1211 Geneva 10  
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2 April 2021

The Armenian Bar Association (“ABA”), the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, the Society for Armenian Studies, the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research, and the Association Internationale des Études Arméniennes submit this letter following up from the previous letters dated 21 January 2021 and 11 February 2021 regarding the need to safeguard Armenian cultural heritage and churches in Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh) and the need to provide access to worshippers seeking to visit Armenian religious sites now under Azerbaijan’s control.

It has been two months since the ABA and the Mother See submitted their report to the Special Rapporteurs and, unfortunately, *the concern of imminent destruction has already materialized in a most shocking way*. Last week, BBC correspondent Jonah Fisher showed in a report that the Zoravor Holy Mother of God Church, located near the village of Mekhakavan (Jebrayil) in Artsakh, has been destroyed in its entirety.<sup>1</sup> These before-and-after screenshots are taken from the video published by the BBC, courtesy of video journalist, Abdujalil Abdurasulov. The first picture shows the church before the taking of the territory by Azerbaijan. The second picture shows the picture taken by Mr. Fisher.

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<sup>1</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh: The mystery of the missing church available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-56517835>



This was the very same church that was mentioned in our original report to you. Armenia's Ambassador to the Netherlands, Tigran Balayan, had shared on Twitter a video showing a mercenary pronouncing the Islamic call to prayer while standing on the bell tower of the church.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Photo source: Tigran Balayan, Twitter (14 Nov. 2020), <https://twitter.com/tbalayan/status/1327676346315706369?s=20>.



Another video shows Azerbaijani military vandalizing the Armenian church of St. Yeghishe in Mataghis, Artsakh (built in the 19th century).<sup>3</sup> The office of the Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Artsakh has been documenting these violations.<sup>4</sup>

The Zoravor Holy Mother of God Church was consecrated in 2017. Despite its young age, its intentional destruction is characteristic of the cultural genocide about which numerous scholars have raised the alarm. Most experts predict that Azerbaijan’s cultural genocide of Armenian cultural and religious heritage will occur incrementally over many years, if not decades, starting with the more recent Armenian churches, dating to the 18th to 21st centuries (as already seen with the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral and Kanach Zham Church in Shushi) before moving on to the older, lesser known sites (such as the sanctums of Okhte Drni in Hadrut and Yeghishe Arakyal near Madaghis), and finally to the crown jewels of Armenian cultural heritage (such as the holy cloister of Dadivank). For an in-depth analysis of the real and realized threat, we refer you to the Sunday Edition of Hyperallergic magazine published on February 28, 2021, “Artsakh: Cultural Heritage under Threat” available at: <https://newsletters.hyperallergic.com/profile/sunday/issues/sunday-edition-artsakh-cultural-heritage-under-threat-419872>

As stated in our previous report, we respectfully urge the Special Rapporteurs to intervene with utmost urgency and visit the sites that are under now under Azerbaijani control and also to demand accountability from the Azerbaijani government for these acts of destruction. Further acts of destruction can be prevented with your intervention, but time is truly of the essence.

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<sup>3</sup> Office of the Human Rights Defender in the Republic of Armenia, Press Release, available at: [https://www.ombuds.am/en\\_us/site/VideoGalleryView/520](https://www.ombuds.am/en_us/site/VideoGalleryView/520)

<sup>4</sup> Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Artsakh: 26 January 2021 – “Ad Hoc Public Report on the Armenian Cultural Heritage in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh): Cases of Vandalism and At Risk of Destruction by Azerbaijan” available at: <https://artsakhombuds.am/en/document/792>; Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Artsakh: 25 March 2021 – Press Release “Damage to Cultural Property Means Damage to the Cultural Heritage of All Mankind” available at: <https://artsakhombuds.am/en/news/500>

We request an opportunity to discuss these issues with you at your convenience and look forward to working with you to protect and preserve the cultural heritage of the region, an intrinsic part of world, regional and Christian history.

Submitted by:

Armenian Bar Association  
Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin  
Society for Armenian Studies  
National Association for Armenian Studies and Research  
Association Internationale des Études Arméniennes