



# General Assembly

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Agenda item 4

**Human rights situations that require the Council's attention**

### **Note verbale dated 30 June 2020 from the Permanent Mission of Armenia to the United Nations Office at Geneva addressed to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Armenia to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva presents its compliments to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and has the honour to transmit the remarks made by the Deputy Foreign Minister of the Republic of Armenia, Artak Apitonian, during the teleconference on the theme “Every action counts: effective and sustainable protection of the rights of refugees in Armenia” held on the occasion of World Refugee Day (see annex).

The Permanent Mission of Armenia kindly requests the Office of the High Commissioner to circulate the present note verbale and the annex thereto\* as a document of the forty-fourth session of the Human Rights Council, under agenda item 4.

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\* Reproduced as received, in the language of submission only.



**Annex to the note verbale dated 30 June 2020 from the Permanent Mission of Armenia to the United Nations Office at Geneva addressed to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

**Remarks dated 20 June 2020 by Deputy Foreign Minister of the Republic of Armenia Artak Apitonian at “Every action counts: Effective and sustainable protection of the rights of refugees in Armenia” teleconference on the occasion of World Refugee Day**

I would like to thank the International Center for Human Development and its President Tevan Poghosyan, the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Armenia and the Armenian Migration Service for this initiative. I would also like to welcome the UN Resident Coordinator in Armenia Shombi Sharp, the Human Rights Defender (Ombudsman) of the Republic of Armenia Arman Tatoyan and all other participants.

20 years ago, by the decision of the UN General Assembly, June 20 was declared World Refugee Day. First and foremost, this was a tribute to the persons who had become refugees by fate. This event is yet another opportunity to take stock of the efforts that have been exerted and those underway to help refugees.

The 20th century was called the era of refugees. At the turn of that century, Armenia and the Armenians became one of the first targets of the newly emerging global humanitarian relief action. The Near East Relief Committee, set up to provide humanitarian assistance to Armenian refugees, was the first large-scale modern humanitarian response program in the world.

Today, I would like to pay special tribute to the first High Commissioner for Refugees of the League of Nations, Fridtjof Nansen, who is remembered by the Armenian people with love and great appreciation. Thanks to Nansen's efforts, 320,000 Armenian refugees who had survived the Armenian genocide received the so called "Nansen passports", for many of them that document would remain their only passport for decades.

In its modern history as well Armenia was compelled to cope with an extraordinary influx of refugees. During the last years of the Soviet Union – starting from February 1988 – as a result of pogroms and killings of the Armenian population in Azerbaijan, more than half a million Armenians left their permanent places of residence, about 400 thousand out of them fled to Armenia. Later, as a result of the bombings of Armenia's border regions and occupation of Artsvashen exclave by Azerbaijan, another 72,000 internally displaced persons became homeless.

Thus, the newly independent Armenia was confronted with the responsibility to address the urgent needs of more than half a million displaced persons in addition to more than half a million people deprived of their homes as a result of the devastating earthquake of December 1988. All resources were utilized to provide people with shelter: hotels, rest houses, schools and administrative buildings. Some of the deportees were hosted in homes of relatives and even strangers. It was also thanks to the willingness of the local population to help the refugees and share their concerns, that the unwanted prospect of setting up tent cities and districts for the refugees was avoided. The assistance provided by the international community, including the UNHCR, during this period could not be overestimated.

In the mid-1990s, it became clear that the voluntary return of refugees to a country pursuing a state policy of hatred and hostility against the Armenian people was unrealistic. Under these conditions, our government adopted the policy of naturalization of refugees. UNHCR called the process of integrating refugees and granting them citizenship undertaken by Armenia as “one of the most successful voluntary naturalizations of refugees in the world”. Needless to say, that the shameful practice of the instrumentalization of the refugees and using them as a tool for political pressure has been alien to us from the outset.

I should emphasize that the successful naturalization programs implemented by the governments of Armenia and Artsakh do not in any way solve the needs of the refugees to

return to the places of their former residence or to receive compensation for property loss. This remains the inalienable right of every refugee and his/her descendants.

It is worth mentioning that even in terms of compensations, Armenia has tried to do its utmost. Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia had been given time and opportunities by the authorities to sell or exchange their property and receive their bank savings. Moreover, in the conditions of economic disaster and blockade, the Armenian government provided 110 mln. USD compensation for their material losses.

Meanwhile, the Armenian refugees who migrated to Armenia or Artsakh from Azerbaijan following the Baku and Sumgait massacres and military operations in the Lower Karabakh and Getashen regions and who, for understandable reasons, had not have the same opportunities, mostly left behind all their property, and have not received compensation for material or immaterial losses up to day.

In April 2016, Azerbaijan provoked new military aggression against Artsakh. More than 2000 displaced residents from Talish, Martuni, Martakert and Hadrut regions who found temporary refuge in Armenia were supported by the UNHCR and the ICRC, and I avail myself of this opportunity to renew to them my gratitude.

The Government of Armenia has repeatedly drawn the attention of the international community to the vulnerability of the population residing in the conflict zones, with a call to ensure their protection by upholding the principles of international law and first and foremost - the principle of universal human rights.

The implementation of humanitarian programs, the provision of urgent humanitarian assistance to the population in crisis situations must be carried out regardless of the circumstances, including the status of the territory. These words are also relevant in the current context, when humanity has united in the fight against COVID-19.

As of today, the neglect of the plight of more than 30,000 refugees and IDPs in Artsakh by the international community remains an issue of concern, as they are deprived of international assistance and protection. That is strange, especially with reference to the UN, in particular, UNHCR which is mandated to ensure assistance to the refugees regardless of the political resolution of the conflicts. We hold that this is exactly the case when the Organization should realize its humanitarian mandate without yielding to the pressure of the state responsible for the origination of this problem.

Despite its limited financial resources, like in the past, Armenia continues to be a host country for refugees, providing shelter to the people at various times affected by wars and internal turmoil. For years, Armenia has accepted refugees from Iraq and Syria.

In 2009, the first UN-funded "Social House" for Iraqi refugees started to operate in the village of Darbnik. Today, about 22,000 refugees from Syria live and create in Armenia. The Armenian government is guided by the principle of meeting various socio-economic, legal, cultural and psychological needs of refugees.

Armenia also joins the efforts of the international community to alleviate the plight of refugees. In the last decade, the world once again faced new challenges, which yielded extensive influxes of refugees. To confront this crisis, the UN Global Compact was adopted, to the development of which the Republic of Armenia made its active contribution. The main goal of the document is to jointly confront the new challenges, equally sharing the burden of the countries.

Since April 2015, Armenia is a member of the UNHCR Executive Committee, thus contributing to the solution of the refugee problems at the international platforms.

It is evident that the gross and massive violations of human rights often lead to displacement, in this respect, national, ethnic or religious minorities are the most vulnerable. As an elected member of the UN Human Rights Council, Armenia has included in its priority areas addressing the human rights of refugees and root causes of displacement and discrimination.

We are convinced that every country should efficiently utilize the potential of the refugees to facilitate their real integration in the host country.

Thank you