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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Association pour la défense des droits de l'homme et des revendications démocratiques/culturelles du peuple Azerbaidjanais-Iran - « ARC », a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[23 January 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Existential Environmental Risks Instigated by Iranian Authorities in Azerbaijani Provinces

The Statement presents evidence of risk exposures violating the mandates for a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. It shows that these are ‘existential risks’ to Azerbaijanis in the sense that no matter what and how Azerbaijanis strive to safeguard their environment, Iranian authorities act in their singular mind to undermine the environment in Azerbaijani provinces. These existential risks are outside the detection of the antenna of UNHRC.

The current Statement describes the following 5 cases:

Case-1: Lake Urmia

The case of Lake Urmia is pivotal in understanding existential risks. To understand the disaster, consider its evolution through phases:

Phase-1 (-1990): This is the baseline phase of Lake Urmia from time immemorial until 1990 when interactions of Azerbaijanis with the Lake were sustainable through traditional ways.

Phase-2 (1990-2023): Elected Iranian governments, each and all, acted in unison, where:

- i. Ref1: Informs on dam construction programs as the brainchild of the Iranian State pumping in funds to the basin but pumping away its life; presents stakeholders' analysis (who did what); describes impacts; and details Azerbaijani protests and their ruthless suppression since 2010 (several/year).
- ii. Ref2: Analyses the panic provoked by the government's orchestrated plans.
- iii. Ref3: Reflects on truth, myth and myth-busting that Iranian authorities had the mission to desiccate Lake Urmia.

Phase-3 (2024-): Now Lake Urmia is no more as Iranian authorities ensured that it is all desiccated. However, it has invoked realignment among the nation of Azerbaijan with ‘existential hope’ to restore it for its salvation. Contrast this with Iranian authorities already mobilized a fresh ‘Disinformation Army’ tasked with:

- Poisoning the media with colorful myths and creating incredible fake stories.
- Masking their scandalous dam construction program by propaganda and diffusing the situation through myths and fake stories, at an unprecedented scale.

Phase-4 (-future): The overwhelming national feeling of Azerbaijanis is that the restoration of Lake Urmia will be possible only when existential risks are resolved.

Sources of Existential Risks: Association pour la défense des droits de l'homme et des revendications démocratiques/culturelles du peuple Azerbaïdjanais-Iran - « ARC » has reflected the latest thinking from the ongoing scientific research reports, the thinking of Azerbaijani environmental activists, and contradictory government sources in Refs1-3. Accordingly, there was no shortage of water to maintain Lake Urmia. Ref1 reflects that explicit decisions of government officials ever since 1990 have been to desiccate Lake Urmia. The Pathways: Constructing more than 40 dams in this small basin (52,000 km²) accounts for the pathways of the risk as solid proof that the risk was crafted by the Iranian State. Receptor: Direct receptors are 10-15 million Azerbaijanis in the basin, the flora and fauna of the basin and all that goes with it. Consequences: Iranian authorities are not seen to have been monitoring the impacts of desiccating Lake Urmia. Instead, they inflict fear of migration by impending salt-storms.

Case-2: Aquifer Depletion

The case of aquifer depletion is endemic in the Islamic Republic of Iran for not being managed by a participative planning system. Azerbaijani freshwater resources were fairly stable, but their states have been destabilized in the last three decades by Iranian hegemony inflicting existential risks by running a cynical system to destabilize Azerbaijani resources, as outlined below:

- In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the state of fresh renewable water resources was often fragile but they have been subjected to high water stress conditions across the country since 1990.
- The pressures stem from the official policy of self-sufficiency, population growth, shifts in climatic patterns, and inefficient water use, particularly in agriculture.
- Irrigation takes a major proportion of water use and consumption.
- Iranian authorities employ three major strategies to alleviate water stress:
 - i. Publicized transfers of desalinated seawater to central provinces.
 - ii. Unpublicized transboundary diversions from peripheral to central provinces.
 - iii. Unpublicized cultivation of efficient crops in the central provinces but inefficient crops often in Azerbaijani provinces.

This inflicted discriminatory and racist water governance causes water scarcity, droughts and inequitable water distribution among, (so-called) minority nations. In Azerbaijani provinces, the situation report may be summarized as:

- Groundwater resources are not being replenished; hence life here will be almost impossible.
- As Iranian self-sufficiency instigated water extraction from aquifers without their replenishments, more than 90,000 pumps sprung up since 1990 in the Lake Urmia Basin alone, with no program to ensure their replenishment.
- Over-abstracted groundwater is deteriorating water quality and creating untold water security problems in Azerbaijani provinces.

Case-3: Qara Qishlaq

This is the case of Azerbaijani villagers expressing their environmental rights in Qara Qishlaq, a village district attached to Salmas County, northwest corner of Lake Urmia, West Azerbaijan province. Its countryside is renowned for its good groundwater resources.

In Jan-2024, villagers learned that their livelihood would shatter by Iranian authorities for approving the construction of a factory by Kaveh Glass Industrial Group. The Group has a dreadful record against the environment, mistreating its employees and corruption but is harbored by the Iranian government. Consider the breaching of their wastewater lagoons in the Maragha complex on 25-Apr-2010 by a local flood, pouring approximately 1 million m³ of highly toxic water into watercourses, thereby to farms on floodplains and groundwater. An academic research paper discovered that if the groundwater is treated through the Pump-Treat-Inject technology, it will take 30 years before the concentration of the contaminants is lowered to their maximum permissible values. Yet, the Group accepted no responsibility!

A brief account of the reactions of the villagers in Qara Qishlaq is as follows:

- The factory-owner lobbied for the backing of President Raisi in Aug-2023.
- 12Jan-2024: The villagers rallied their peaceful protests and rejected another factory by the Group in their neighborhood.
- They rallied for the conservation of their meadows and preventing the polluting factory turning their village into a ghost town.

- Some village elders put on symbolic white shrouds to signify their struggle for the conservation of the environment.
- Security agents shattered peaceful protests with their full antiriot gear.
- 70 protesters were rounded up and detained for 48 hours.
- Some were then released but most were transferred to Salmas, which were released on 13-Jan-24.
- Reportedly, security agents threatened detainees with raping their related women folk and subjected the victims to physical violence.

Case-4: Aghdere Gold Mining 8

This case presents a glimpse of Azerbaijani protests in Aghdere, Tikantepe to uphold their environmental/human rights and to demand deploying local workforces; and attacks by Iranian hegemony on helpless protesters. This case took place in Middle Aghdere, Tikantepe District, West Azerbaijan Province. There are two major gold mines in Tikantepe (Aghdere Gold Mine and Zarshouran Gold Mine), largely owned by foreign/Iranian cartels, their exploitations account for 40% of the gold extracted in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Local environmentalists are outspoken by monitoring impacts but at risk to their safety.

We received confirmed reports that:

- 30Jul-24 (Daytimes): a large number of the Aghdere population protested against the expulsion of local workforces from mining compounds and against non-standard mining methods destroying meadows and agriculture in the region.
- Midnight: security agents wreaked havoc during their night raid to Middle Aghdere, resorted to violence and arrested 50 individuals.
- 31Jul-24 (Morning): Villagers gathered in front of Tikantepe magistrate and demanded the release of the detainees, but the police shot and wounded Nasir Bahramian, Hojjet Momenzade and Armin Nikzad, who were hospitalized for their deep bullet wounds.

Case-5: Energy Sector

Ref4 details the case of burning crude oil in Tabriz in March 2022 inflicting untold health risks to Azerbaijanis. In Winter 2023/24, we must state that the situation remains as grave as ever, as breathing problems prevail even in neighborhoods.

Concluding Remarks

Existential risks to the Azerbaijani environment in the Islamic Republic of Iran are gradually shifting from highly stressed towards a gloomy and dangerous near future, a mirror image of the fate of Lake Urmia. In the recent past, Iranian authorities would withdraw tactically but creep in at their convenience. Now, no more tactical withdrawals, as they are in their full-gear offensive mode.

Association pour la défense des droits de l'homme et des revendications démocratiques/culturelles du peuple Azerbaïdjanais-Iran - « ARC » draws the Council's attention to the recent Framework between UNDP and Iranian authorities for 2023-2027, minded commendably with "leaving no one behind." The framework is good but leaves behind 59 million minority nations out of 88 million of the population in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is because there are existential risks in the Islamic Republic of Iran yet to be made detectable by the framework. Based on the evidence in the Statement, we recommend that UNHRC extend the detection range of their antenna to encompass existential risks in the Islamic Republic of Iran stemming from racism.

The Statement builds on our past ones, Therefore, they are referenced as follows:

Ref1: Our Statement to the 51st UNHRC Session

Ref2: Our Statement to the 53rd UNHRC Session

Ref3: https://www.arcdh.eu/2023/09/04/7591_a_hrc_54_ngo_sub_en/

Ref4: Our Statement to the 49th UNHRC Session

(<https://www.instagram.com/p/CviNH63IfZq/?ref=portal>)

(<https://t.me/ARCHUMANRIGHTS/6139>)

(<https://t.me/ARCHUMANRIGHTS/6147>)(https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/UNSDCF_Iran%20Republic%20of-2023-2027.pdf)