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# Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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Chair: Mr. Ali Ehsassi





# Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Wednesday, January 25, 2023

• (1110)

[*English*]

**The Chair (Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.)):** Good afternoon. Welcome to meeting number 44 of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

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

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike, and please mute yourselves when you are not speaking. Interpretation for those on Zoom is at the bottom of your screen, and you have a choice of floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

I will remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

Today we are meeting on the topic of the current situation between Azerbaijan and Armenia. I would like to welcome the witnesses, who will each have five minutes for their opening remarks.

Witnesses, when you are speaking and you have 30 seconds remaining, I will hold up a red card to let you know that you should be wrapping up your remarks. The same goes for questions posed by members.

We're very happy to welcome, for the first panel today, from the Armenian National Committee of Canada, Shahen Mirakian, co-president.

Welcome back, Mr. Mirakian.

We're also grateful to have with us Ms. Taline Papazian, lecturer and researcher, Sciences Po, Paris.

Go ahead, Mr. Bergeron.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ):** Mr. Chair, I would like to make three brief points of order.

Firstly, you said that today's meeting was about the situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. I don't want to be picky, but I thought it was primarily about the Lachin corridor.

Secondly, I wanted to make sure that the sound tests had indeed been successfully carried out for the witnesses appearing by video-conference.

Thirdly, Mr. Chair, you were aware that we had requested that the Minister of Foreign Affairs be with us. Can you give us an update on the minister's availability?

[*English*]

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

On the first issue you have raised, you are absolutely correct: This is pursuant to the 106(4) that was submitted by you and other members. It is about Lachin road.

On the second question you posed, yes, we did check, and we ensured that sound checks were undertaken for everyone who is joining us by Zoom.

Third, yes, I was assured by the clerk that an invitation was extended to the minister, but regrettably, given the short notice that was provided, it was not possible.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** We can come back to this, Mr. Chair, but if we cannot hear from the minister, let us hope that we will at least have the opportunity to hear from representatives of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development on this important issue that we are dealing with today.

[*English*]

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

Now we will go to our first witness, who is Mr. Mirakian.

Mr. Mirakian, thank you for joining us. You have five minutes.

**Mr. Shahen Mirakian (Co-President, Armenian National Committee of Canada):** Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for inviting the Armenian National Committee of Canada to provide evidence to you today.

My name is Shahen Mirakian, and I am the co-president of the Armenian National Committee of Canada. I apologize for not being able to join you in person today.

Today's meeting is to study the present situation of the blockade of the Lachin corridor. My evidence today will not go into detail about the background and current circumstances of the blockade of the Goris-Stepanakert highway through the Berdzor-Lachin corridor by groups directed by the Azerbaijani government. Instead, I will discuss the impact of the blockade on the Armenian Canadian community and Canada's role in preventing this ongoing genocide.

To fully appreciate the evidence I am providing, it is necessary to understand that this road, through this narrow corridor, is the only land connection between the Republic of Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, or Artsakh. This highway is used to transport the necessities of life to Artsakh, including food and medical supplies. It is also used to transport patients to better-equipped hospitals in Armenia, which is particularly important during the current global pandemic.

In addition to the Goris-Stepanakert highway, the Lachin corridor contains a pipeline supplying natural gas from Armenia to Artsakh. The connections providing electricity and telecommunications connectivity from Armenia to Artsakh are also in the area of this corridor, though not necessarily directly within its territory. Therefore, in addition to blocking the transport of supplies on the highway, Azerbaijan also has the ability to block the supply of gas and electricity to Artsakh and to block Artsakh's ability to communicate with the outside world.

In the most basic terms, the safety and survival of Artsakh's 120,000 current residents is entirely dependent on the Lachin corridor and surrounding areas remaining free of any disruption of the free movement of people and supplies from and to Armenia.

Since December 12, 2022, there has been an almost complete cessation of the movement of traffic on the road and periodic, significant disruptions of the supply of gas, electricity and communications. This has resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe that has had a significant impact on the Armenian Canadian community. Every member of the community has a significant connection to at least one person in Artsakh. These are their relatives and friends who are trapped, starving and freezing.

For our community, this is not some peripheral story about the waning of Russian influence or some philosophical argument about how to enforce international law. For us, we know that, despite the defiance and unbreakable spirit of our friends and relatives, the Azerbaijani blockade is a serious and constant threat to them and to the survival of Artsakh's people.

This is exactly the kind of situation that requires intervention from the international community, including Canada. For us, the time for patience or debate has long since passed. The issue is long past the need for further study.

On December 14, 2022, the Canadian government called on the Azerbaijani authorities to open the road and said that it was following the closure of the corridor closely. I am almost certain the Canadian government completely underestimated the gravity of the situation at that point. The government probably thought that Azerbaijan was just putting some pressure on Armenia. They assumed that someone else would take care of it, and they believed that their concern would be sufficient.

At that time, the Armenian Canadian community warned the government about the gravity of the situation. We explained that, without actual concrete action from the international community, the Azerbaijani government would never end the blockade. Unless there were real consequences, there would be no end to the Azerbaijani threats to the lives of the people of Artsakh and Armenia.

Today we are repeating those concerns, this time backed up by the experience of the past six weeks. We call upon the Government of Canada to use its moral standing and considerable international influence to work with our allies to immediately end the Azerbaijani blockade and put in place the necessary conditions to assure the security of the people of Artsakh. Canada must raise this issue in all international bodies where it and Azerbaijan are members, including the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Canada must treat this situation as a foreign policy priority.

We are confident that the Government of Canada will be more receptive, and this time we expect to see tangible steps taken immediately.

Thank you.

• (1115)

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

We now go to Ms. Papazian.

Ms. Papazian, you similarly have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Dr. Taline Papazian (Researcher in political science, Lecturer at Sciences Po, École de l'Air, As an Individual):** Ladies and gentlemen, honourable members of the committee, good morning.

As Mr. Mirakian said a moment ago, a five-kilometre corridor is the only connection between the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave and the outside world. In fact, the outside world is itself a half-land-locked area, as two of Armenia's four borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey are closed and have been for 30 years.

Since its military victory in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, Azerbaijan has unfortunately undergone extremely rapid radicalization. The objectives are twofold. On the one hand, Azerbaijan wants to finish with the remains of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Instead of toning it down, the autocrat Aliyev has on the contrary strongly turned up the volume of his militaristic rhetoric. Military blitzkrieg operations have already taken place several times in 2021 and 2022, whether on the contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh, where Russian interposition forces have been stationed since November 9, 2020, or on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

On the other hand, they are seeking a second corridor. I am using the terminology officially put forward by Mr. Aliyev. This corridor, which he wishes to see in the south of Armenia, would allow Azerbaijan to have a land connection between the Azerbaijani mainland and the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan, which has the status of an autonomous Azerbaijani republic.

Mr. Aliyev wants to establish a corridor that is equivalent to the Lachin corridor. Yet the very real situations and threats to the population of Latsar have no equivalent for the Azerbaijani population of Nakhichevan. The creation of, or demand for, an extraterritorial corridor that Armenia would cede to Azerbaijan, depriving itself of sovereignty over this part of its territory, is unacceptable to Armenia. We can come back to this during the question rounds, if you wish.

The means used by Azerbaijan is the systematic use of ultraviolence by its armed forces. This ultraviolence is supported by a very large majority of Azerbaijani society, since this society has been fed Armenophobia since its earliest childhood, for several decades. The result is unfortunately to deny any human status and any potential victim status to Armenians, based on their ethnicity.

Militarily, Azerbaijan is infinitely stronger than Armenia. Azerbaijan has invested huge sums of money modernizing its military and weaponry, since the 2010s, thanks to its hydrocarbon export revenues. Its two main suppliers, known for the quality of their weapons, are Turkey and Israel; the former meets NATO standards and the latter uses state-of-the-art technology. Military co-operation between the Turkish and Azerbaijani armed forces is also extremely strong and extensive.

In contrast, Armenia is becoming increasingly estranged from Russia, an ally, but only on paper. Indeed, Armenia very recently refused to allow military exercises by the Collective Security Treaty Organization, of which it is a nominal member, to take place on its territory. Russia last supplied arms to Armenia in 2019. The Armenian prime minister openly complained two months ago about Russia's monumental pressure on Armenia, both for the opening of the so-called Zanguezur corridor and for a possible request for Armenia to join the Union of Russia and Belarus.

My final point is that Armenia suffers from international isolation that puts it at the mercy of its neighbour's appetites. By contrast, Azerbaijan has international partners, including trading partners, because of its oil and gas production, and accomplices. It was enough to hear the Belarusian autocrat Lukashenko tell the Armenian prime minister in late October 2022 that Aliyev is their man, and he should understand that.

In fact, two days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, on February 22, 2022, Azerbaijan and Russia had signed a strategic agreement that enhanced diplomatic and military co-operation between the two countries. According to Aliyev, for Azerbaijan, this brought the relationship with Russia to the level of an alliance.

Azerbaijan has become, since Russia's war against Ukraine, an important tool in circumventing international sanctions against Russia.

• (1120)

In this respect, Gazprom's press release of November 18, 2022 is quite explicit. Indeed, a new contract with SOCAR will increase Russian exports to Azerbaijan to 1 billion cubic metres of gas between November 2022 and March 2023.

With Russia rapidly weakening in Ukraine, destabilization of the South Caucasus is increasingly underway. There you have the most

volatile ceasefire in the former ex-Soviet region. This ceasefire has been, until very recently, completely off the radar of the international community and any monitoring system.

It seems, however, that in recent weeks there is an international awareness of the gravity of the situation in Artsakh, which has been under blockade for 44 days.

The UN Security Council attempted to get a declaration adopted. This attempt, although supported by 11 out of 15 states, was nevertheless rejected...

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Ms. Papazian, I would ask you to conclude your opening remarks in the next 30 seconds, please. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** Yes, definitely.

The U.S. Senate Foreign Relations and Defense committees are speaking out regularly, and the U.S. Secretary of State has been calling for a reopening.

Two options are slowly emerging. The first would be the replacement of the Russian interposition forces with another type of peace-keeping force. The second option would be the opening of an air bridge.

If no one acts, the Artsakh blockade will continue, or it will end as dictated by Azerbaijan, with the suitcase or the coffin.

Thank you for your attention.

**Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.):** On a point of order, Mr. Chair.

It was almost impossible to hear the witness's statement, in both French and English.

Does the witness have notes for her speech? It was almost impossible for me to understand, both in French and English. I switched channels between the two languages, but it was going too fast for me.

[*English*]

Are there notes?

[*Translation*]

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** If the interpretation was not clear, I have some draft notes I could pass on to you after the meeting.

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** May I also say bravo to the interpreter!

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Oliphant, I've just been advised by the clerk that they will be raising the sound, so maybe that will assist.

• (1125)

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** The problem was not one of sound, but of speed, in both French and English.

[English]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** That's always the case for us. The witnesses are always speaking fast. We are faced with that situation even more than you are.

**The Chair:** I would just ask the witnesses to slow down a bit, not only so the interpreters can follow but also so members can benefit from your remarks.

Now we will follow with questions from the members. For the first round, each member has six minutes. Again, for the benefit of our witnesses, just so you know that you should be wrapping up your responses, when there are only 30 seconds remaining in a member's question and answer time, I will hold up a red sign.

For our first member, we go to Mr. Chong.

You have six minutes, sir.

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

Protesters characterized as environmental activists have reportedly been blocking the Lachin corridor since the 12th of December 2022, so my first question for our witnesses is this: What exactly is the nature of the physical blockade? How many protesters are we talking about here? Are we talking about transport trucks being used to blockade the corridor? Is it a barricade that has been erected?

What exactly is the nature of the physical blockade of the Lachin corridor?

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** Mr. Chong, if I could suggest it, that question would probably be better put to the people on the next panel, who are both present and much more familiar with exactly what's happening.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I appreciate that. Thank you.

Perhaps Madame Papazian would know the answer to that question. If not, that's fine. I have other questions too.

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** We have glimpses of what is going on from the media, but I would say, like Mr. Mirakian, that people who are really physically present, close to the Lachin corridor, would answer that much better.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I appreciate your candour on that.

What do we know about these protesters who are blockading this road, this corridor? Are they singular in their demands, or are there different groups involved with different demands?

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** Again, Mr. Chong, I would recommend that possibly the next panel would provide a more specific answer to that.

The demands were very singular when this first began, but they have evolved over time to encompass a longer list of grievances. What at one time may have been about a very specific issue has since evolved to be about a variety of issues. You often hear things like, "Well, we need to have inspection of metals extraction in Artsakh by Azerbaijani natural resources officials." Moving on, it became, "We need to have customs checkpoints in order to prevent weapons from making it into Artsakh." Further on, they said that

there have been foreigners visiting Artsakh without obtaining Azerbaijani visas, so they have to obtain those visas, which turns into that there have also been people from Iran who are fomenting dissent and so forth, who are coming into the Artsakh Republic. Finally, it was that there has been Russian influence and there have been all sorts of provocateurs.

The list of grievances gets longer by the day. I'm not sure if there is necessarily a singular aim at this point.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Thank you. I appreciate that.

What explains the timing of the blockade that began on December 12? Why did it start at that point? What is your opinion as to why the blockade was erected at that time?

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** I can give a very personal opinion, and I don't know if that necessarily matches what everybody else thinks.

My only view is that, on December 2, 2022, there was a very temporary blockade of about, let's say, 12 to 24 hours. The Russian peacekeepers made concessions to remove that blockade. At that point, I think there were some feelings by some people that the Russian peacekeepers were no longer in a position to actually keep this road open through any means, whether stick or carrot. At that point, there was much more of a decision that this could be done.

• (1130)

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Do we know how many Russian soldiers are present at that blockade, if any?

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** The entire Russian peacekeeping contingent was agreed upon in the November 9, 2020, statement among Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan to be 2,000 soldiers.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** That's along the entire border; is it not?

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** That's along the entire line of contact and the other area. What the exact tactical deployment is of Russian peacekeepers, amongst themselves, I'm not sure that anybody knows.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I'm asking because you suggested that, in the December 2 temporary blockade, Russian soldiers were overwhelmed by the people doing the blockade, which gave them the impetus to then establish the more permanent blockade that we've now seen go on for over a month. That's why I'm asking the question.

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** I don't think they were numerically overwhelmed. It was a matter of what the natural response to that was. Is it that you now come up guns blazing, or is there someone you can call and ask to remove it? I think they were overwhelmed strategically at that point in time, or tactically—however you want to describe that action. Once there was a realization that there was a tactical advantage, then anyone would take advantage of it.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I have a final, quick question.

What evidence do we have linking these protesters doing the blockade to the Government of Azerbaijan?

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** Again, the next panel will probably have much more concrete evidence.

I should say that, in general, all forms of civil society action in Azerbaijan tend to be tightly controlled. You don't spontaneously get protests in the country. This isn't me saying this about the level of control exercised by the government. It's Freedom House and Human Rights Watch, and so on.

The expectation is that, if this form of dissent is allowed or if this form of protest is allowed, then somehow the government has at least approved of it.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Chong. We now go to Mr. Oliphant.

You have six minutes, Mr. Oliphant.

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

My questions are shockingly similar to Mr. Chong's. I have four areas I want to look at. One is the nature of the blockade. The second is the effect of the blockade. The third is the role of Russia on the road, and the fourth is the role of Azerbaijan as a government. The fifth one, since you say things with such certainty, would be how you get your information. I'm trying to understand, if there is a lack of telecommunication and a lack of connectivity, where you are getting your information.

With respect to the nature of the blockade, you've said you're not really able to describe it to us. I have seen the news reports, but with respect to the effect of the blockade, I'd like to get into that a little bit. This area of Azerbaijan is not an island. There is a road out, the Lachin road to Armenia, but there is also connectivity between other parts of Azerbaijan and that. Even with respect to that, the governments of both Armenia and Azerbaijan have said that there are supply trucks coming in from the International Committee of the Red Cross and that there have been people who have been ill who have been taken out of the region and across the road into Armenia.

Are those governments wrong? What is the evidence that is saying that the blockade is actually affecting what you're saying it's affecting?

**Mr. Shahen Mirakian:** Mr. Oliphant, I'm going to take all kinds of umbrage with what you just said. First of all, I don't consider this to be part of Azerbaijan, so these are not other parts of Azerbaijan to which it connects. You've sort of already decided the final status of the area and then asked me to reply to it, so that's a loaded question. That's the first point.

The second point is that if I were to say to you, Mr. Oliphant, that you could get deliveries of food only once a week and I would decide what they would be, you would say that's not any way to be living in your house and that you'd prefer to be able to get deliveries whenever you want and that you have the right to.... You may not have a legal right to it, but you certainly have a moral right to that.

If we're saying that the entire population of 120,000 in this area is dependent upon humanitarian relief from the International Committee of the Red Cross and that has to be negotiated with both these blockaders and the Russian peacekeepers, and it will be only from time to time, and the amount of humanitarian supplies coming through will be barely sufficient to maintain a minimum number of

calories amongst the people who live here, including 30,000 children, I think you can say this is a blockade.

• (1135)

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** Is it true, as the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments have said, that the International Committee of the Red Cross is able to get shipments through, or is it just a minimum level? What is the nature of the effect of the blockade?

**Mr. Shahen Mirakian:** In general, with respect to those shipments we talk about, the Red Cross is bringing in humanitarian supplies mostly in the way of medicine or medical supplies, as far as I understand, which are necessary, and then transporting patients who need medical care out to Armenia proper.

The food supplies coming in are mostly being brought in by the Russian peacekeeping contingent, as far as I understand. Some of those food supplies are obviously to feed their own people on the ground, and then some of those food supplies, the additional amount, can go towards feeding other people. Again, we're talking about somewhere around 400 tonnes of traffic going through, most of it being food supplies, into a situation in which there's none. Again, I'm just like....

I'm wondering if you think this is sort of a Potemkin village of empty markets so that the Armenians can somehow get sympathy, or if there are people who are actually hungry there. As far as everyone is concerned and as far as the Red Cross is saying, there are hungry people there. There are literally people who are not getting enough food there. The reason patients are being transported out by the Red Cross and not by regular ambulance when they're supposed to be, and only on a schedule decided by somebody else, is that there is no other way to get them out.

I don't think this is some sort of play acting for sympathy by the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. There's an actual need for food, medical care and medical supplies, which is maybe being met at a level well below what you'd find acceptable as a minimum in Canada.

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** I'm simply asking—and I'm not saying there's any other ulterior motive for my questioning—what the state of play is in the region. What is the state of nutrition and supplies? We do have information that food, medicine and other essential goods are getting in. If not enough of it is, we need to know that.

**Mr. Shahen Mirakian:** It's not enough—

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** Okay. We also need to know what the source of that information is. Who is on the ground, who is reporting and how are they reporting?

**Mr. Shahen Mirakian:** You will be speaking in the next panel to somebody who is in the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh right now. He will tell you exactly how much food his children are getting.

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** Okay. We will ask him then.

**Mr. Shahen Mirakian:** How much more information do you need?

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** I think we'd need a lot of information, actually, because we're trying to understand the nature of the humanitarian situation. That is exactly what we're trying to do: to understand it. We will ask—

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** There was a diplomat from Canada in Armenia last Wednesday, a week ago today. Did he go there to get this information that you're desperately wanting? Is it—

**Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.):** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair, please.

**The Chair:** Yes, Dr. Fry—

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** No, no, but I'm wondering—

**Hon. Hedy Fry:** On a point of order, please, Mr. Chair...?

**The Chair:** Yes, Dr. Fry, please proceed.

**Hon. Hedy Fry:** Thank you.

I would like to see a little bit more civility in the way the witness is responding to the member of Parliament who is asking him questions. I also think it would be respectful for him to let Mr. Oliphant finish his question before he cuts in. I would also like to hear from the other witness.

Thank you.

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** I'm not sure that it's a point of order to hear from the other witness—

**The Chair:** Mr. Mirakian, you have to wait until you are recognized by the chair. If I could remind—

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** I'd like to rise on a point of order, then.

**The Chair:** You do not have the right to a point of order, Mr. Mirakian. The members do.

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** Do I have a right to a response?

**The Chair:** No, you do not.

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** I'd like to ask the clerk if I have the right to a response on a point of order.

**The Chair:** Mr. Mirakian, you do not have the right to a response, but you do have essentially 15 seconds remaining.

I would ask all the witnesses and the members as well to make sure that we are approaching today with the utmost decorum, because we are all here to learn about the situation. We'd be grateful if everyone did co-operate.

Mr. Mirakian, you have 15 seconds remaining.

• (1140)

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** I think I have 15 seconds—

**The Chair:** No. Mr. Mirakian was speaking, and then there was the point of order.

Mr. Mirakian, please proceed.

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** I will just say that I think Dr. Fry has misrepresented my advocacy for a lack of decorum, and I think I have been nothing but polite. I don't think I've used any unparliamentary language. I don't think I've spoken out of turn. I don't think I've interrupted. I waited for Mr. Oliphant to finish and then I responded.

I think there is a difference between vigorous advocacy and a lack of civility and being unparliamentary. Yes, we are here to present our position forcefully and with advocacy. I will apologize if it has been taken incorrectly, but I don't believe I've crossed that line.

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

We will now go to Mr. Bergeron.

Mr. Bergeron, you have six minutes, sir.

[*Translation*]

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

I would like to thank our witnesses for being with us today and for their testimony.

I would like to pick up on what Mr. Oliphant said. I think all my colleagues here are trying to get a better understanding of what is happening on the ground. For your part, you are here to enlighten us on that, with the facts you know and the information you are given. We thank you.

I will address you first, Mr. Mirakian. I would like us to go back to a question put by Mr. Chong. Can you tell us what led you to state on your organization's website and in your opening remarks that the protesters blocking the Lachin corridor are being, so to speak, remote controlled by the government in Baku.

You told us a few moments ago that since demonstrations are, generally speaking, forbidden in that country, the fact that the government is allowing this demonstration in the Lachin corridor is in itself an indication that this is indeed being controlled from a distance by Baku.

Is this the only evidence that allows you to make such a claim?

[*English*]

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** I have it from reliable sources I trust, from people on the ground and people who have studied the issue more closely than I have, that this is the case. I should say that the European Union and the United States, when discussing the issue, have always said that these people were directed, so I believe that people who have intelligence on the ground, including western allies of Canada, have already come to this conclusion. For me to come to a different conclusion would mean that I didn't trust the intelligence of our allies.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Thank you for your reply.

I would also like to come back to a question that was put to you by Mr. Oliphant. I understand that the way he phrased it may have offended you. I will rephrase it. I think I understand what Mr. Oliphant was trying to find out, and I hope I am not misinterpreting his intentions.

Other than the Lachin corridor, are there any functional roads connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan?

Also, do these roads actually allow for the delivery of food and medicine, or are they also all closed?



[English]

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** As far as I am aware, there was a second road constructed between Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. That road is now within the territory of Azerbaijan, and nothing travels along it.

The November 9, 2020, statement by Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan assumed that the connection between Armenia proper and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic would be along this road. This was the route that the three parties to that announcement decided would be the connection that would be used.

• (1145)

[Translation]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Thank you for your extremely enlightening comments.

You have been the victim, so to speak, of a situation the French-speaking members of committees experience very frequently. Some witnesses tend to speak quickly, because they have a lot of relevant things to say in a short period of time, which makes the work of our valiant interpreters somewhat more complicated. I would, in fact, like to take this opportunity to commend their work.

I also wanted to have your written notes, because the last points you raised in your speech seemed to me to be extremely relevant and I thought it was a pity that we did not have access to them. This will not only allow Mr. Oliphant to have the whole of your presentation, it will also allow us to conclude on what you wanted to add.

Here is a very simple question for a political observer: why do you think Russia is not succeeding in reopening the corridor?

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** I would like to be sure that the question is addressed to me, because I did not hear the beginning of your comments, Mr. Bergeron.

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** That's a pity, because I was addressing you specifically.

I was saying that you had been a victim, so to speak, of something that we frequently experience, particularly the French-speaking members of committees, when witnesses have extremely relevant things to say in a very short space of time. They tend to speak quickly, which makes interpretation a bit difficult. Our interpreters do an excellent job...

[English]

**The Chair:** You are at the six-minute mark.

[Translation]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** All right, but you will understand, Mr. Chair, that I was only repeating what I said at the beginning, because Ms. Papazian did not hear it. It's a technical problem. I appeal to your indulgence.

[English]

**The Chair:** Ms. Papazian, if you can, kindly respond in 30 seconds or less.

Thank you.

[Translation]

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** In general, there are two hypotheses to explain why the Russian forces present on the contact line between the Nagorno-Karabakh region and the rest of Azerbaijan do not intervene.

The first assumption is that they do not have the capacity to do so because Russia, busy losing ground in Ukraine and mired in its war in Ukraine, cannot open a "second front".

The second hypothesis is that Russia does not want to, because it has economic interests today that coincide very strongly with those of Azerbaijan. As I said in my statement, on the one hand, Azerbaijan is one of the countries that allow Russia to lighten the financial burden of international sanctions, notably through the distribution of Russian oil that goes to Azerbaijan and then arrives in Europe.

On the other hand, the objective interests of Russia and Azerbaijan converge in exerting maximum pressure on Armenia to make concessions regarding Artsakh and this future corridor Azerbaijan would like to see, which would pass through southern Armenia and connect Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan.

[English]

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

We now go to the next member.

Ms. McPherson, you have six minutes.

**Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today. I know this is a very emotional time. I know that all members of this committee are trying very hard to get more information and to get a better understanding, so thank you for being here and for sharing your perspectives. I am looking forward to the next panel and to getting more information on what is happening directly on the ground.

I think I'll start with you, if I can, Ms. Papazian.

One of the roles we have as parliamentarians and as members of this committee is to hear witnesses and hear testimony, and then provide recommendations to Parliament. From your perspective, what are the opportunities for peacebuilding between Armenia and Azerbaijan right now?

Are there any openings available at the community level? Does the United Nations have an important role? I know that this has not moved forward within the Security Council to date, but I'm wondering if you could comment on what your recommendations would be for the next steps for this.

• (1150)

[Translation]

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** In your work as members of Parliament, I would recommend that you use parliamentary diplomacy with the friendship groups of other countries that, for the time being, are still on the fence about the need to lift the Lachin corridor blockade. I am thinking in particular of the United Kingdom, Albania and the United Arab Emirates, which were warmly thanked by Azerbaijan and Russia after the UN Security Council meeting because they supported the reopening of the Lachin corridor.

Of course, parliamentary diplomacy with Russia is not possible at the moment. However, with the UK, Canada has a real role to play and it would be very valuable to be able to use this regular contact to go beyond mere declarations and really take action, because this can save lives today.

[English]

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

When we look at that role that Canada can play, my next question for you is.... Lifting the blockade and calling for our allies to do that is important. We have tools within the United Nations so we can do that. The Security Council met on December 20, but to date, they have not released a statement or voted on a resolution.

Do you think there's more work that the United Nations will be doing and can be doing, going forward?

[Translation]

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** In any case, a resolution seems essential to me. A resolution could establish an air bridge to supply the people of Artsakh and reshape the peacekeeping forces. If this could be done in a sufficiently subtle way, it would ensure that the lives of the people there would not be further endangered. In this respect, we need to coordinate our efforts with the Russian interposition forces that are still on the ground, and are obviously unable or unwilling to do this job.

[English]

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you very much for that, and thank you for your testimony, Ms. Papazian.

[Translation]

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** Thank you.

[English]

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Mr. Mirakian, I have a few questions for you as well.

Of course, as an Armenian Canadian, I know that the challenges you're facing, or the emotions that you're feeling, must be very difficult. I'm wondering if you could share with this committee what Armenian Canadians are feeling right now. What are they saying to you?

You talked a bit about the role of the Canadian government. We heard from your colleague about things that she recommends for the Canadian government, but I'd like your perspective on that as well, please.

**Mr. Shahen Mirakian:** I should say that there are two perspectives here.

One is the purely emotional, in the sense that this is your acquaintance, your family member or someone you've met and you've visited and who has visited you. It's someone you know very well. They're going through an extremely difficult time, and they're having real problems. Their electricity is cut off. It's very cold. There's no gas. There's not enough food. The schools are now closed because there's not enough electricity or food to allow them to be open. People are not going to work anymore. Economically, the situation is getting more and more dire. We obviously feel that in our skin. That's only natural.

I think that at a deeper level we also realize that there has been, at some level, a derogation of the duty of the international community to care for these people, and maybe we feel that we're not a priority, that we're not important, that we've been forgotten and that somehow these people are going to have to die to prove the point that the world can't look away. I think that's very sad for people.

We're a people used to being ignored and forgotten and so on. In the Armenian genocide and the previous massacres, there were a lot of people who looked away. They didn't care about what happened to the Armenian people until it was too late, and then people were scrambling to feed the refugees, as if they couldn't remember why they were refugees. I think that, when you feel that feeling again and the same helplessness, it's very difficult. It's more than just the feeling of seeing somebody you know in trouble. It's a feeling that your entire people do not matter on this planet and that you're not really part of the diversity.

I think the difference is that people should care. Canada should care. Canada has a role to play. Canada is a country that has a very strong moral compass, that believes in a rules-based international order and that believes in doing the right thing. It's a country that cares, and Canada should care. If you make this a priority, it makes a difference. I don't believe that the influence of Canada somehow ends at the borders of Azerbaijan. If we can collectively, as a people and as a government, come together and work on this, we will solve it. Canada is a powerful nation, and we have a real moral standing. We have a role to play.

That's it.

• (1155)

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

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

We now go to the second round. We will have four minutes for the first member.

We'll now go to Mr. Hoback.

**Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

I guess Mr. Mirakian said it well: There's something that Canada can be doing. There's always a role that we can play internationally when we're respected internationally.

Pragmatically, though, what things should we be doing at this point in time that would actually make a difference?

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** If Canada works with its allies, makes statements, makes this a priority and then lets the people who are best placed make some of these changes happen, such as the European Union.... The European Union probably has the most moral suasion and ability, seeing as it has relations with Azerbaijan that are important to Azerbaijan.

If Canada were to say, "Look, this is a priority for Canada—we care about this and you should care about it, too, and we're going to do everything we can to make you care about this," I think it would make a difference.

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** Ms. Papazian, how do you see what he's just said about Canada influencing the EU? How much influence does the EU need? How much influence does France need in order to take a more active role in this situation?

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** That's a very good question, actually, Mr. Hoback.

France has been quite vocal within the European Union, but as you know, the European Union is not a coherent unit when it comes to foreign policy. However, we have seen more and more engagement at the European Union level. There has been, for example, a civilian mission that has been sent to monitor the ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

That's not in Artsakh, but it may be a first step towards bringing the volatility of the ceasefire in the region more on the radar of the international community. All your remarks prove how much information is lacking in the outside world to understand what is going on in Artsakh, even on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and that's really a crucial point.

The second point, very quickly, is that Armenia is a member of the francophone countries, so that's also a place where maybe Canada, Armenia and France can meet, discuss and do things in common. That may be another platform.

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** How do you see the trust in the Russian peacekeepers? Are they trusted by both sides? Are they trusted by the European Union? Is it actually a barrier to seeing more response out of Europe because it's Russian peacekeepers on the ground?

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** For people on the ground, Russian peacekeepers are like the only remaining shield between them and physical extinction. Even if they're not trusted, they are the only guarantee—minimal guarantee.

As for the European Union, no, the European Union doesn't trust the Russian peacekeepers. The European Parliament was very clear in their resolution yesterday. They even called for a replacement of Russian peacekeepers by OSCE peacekeepers.

Those are quite distinct sensibilities on the issue. Obviously, the impact on your immediate physical existence is not the same when you talk about one perspective or the other.

• (1200)

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** How would the Armenians view that resolution? Would they view that positively? I won't ask you to speak on the Azerbaijanis, as I'm sure they'd have their opinions on it, but from an Armenian perspective, how do you see that they would view that?

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** For Armenians in Armenia, positively, but as for the Armenians in Artsakh, maybe we should ask the witnesses in the second panel.

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** Okay. That's fair.

With regard to a path forward, again, where do you see France and Europe taking this to the next level? What type of encouragement do they need? If we're there to motivate, for lack of a better word, what needs to be said?

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** Motivate for what, a task force?

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** Yes, or for Europeans to actually take more action, for France to take more action—people who have more influence in the area and are closer to the area. What does Canada need to do to move that along?

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** Again, the first thing I would do would be to work within the parliaments of the different countries together in order to make that possible and to have a foot on the ground in order to know what is going on first-hand, because we're not only in a war here. The blockade is an act of war, but we're also in a war of information. Armenians have been losing that war of information for so long. Part of the reason is that the lack of information is critical, and in terms of international organizations, nobody is there except for the Red Cross. Nobody is seeing what is going on in Artsakh.

As I said, even the Armenian-Azerbaijan ceasefire, in place since 1994, was never monitored. There was never consistent, periodic information regularly on who was disrupting the ceasefire and sanctions for doing that. That would be a big plus.

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** Chair, just before I give up the last of my time—

**The Chair:** Mr. Hoback, you're considerably over time.

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** Chair, I'm just addressing you.

Mr. Mirakian made a point that there was a diplomat on the ground last week. Could the subcommittee explore that and see if it's possible to either have his report or have him come before the committee?

I'll leave that with you and the subcommittee to look at.

**The Chair:** Thank you. That's a good point, Mr. Hoback.

We now go to Mr. Sarai for four minutes.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

My question will go to Dr. Papazian.

If you could elaborate on what the European Union actually ruled on or what they came up with in their findings and recommendations to resolve the conflict, that would be helpful. Just briefly, what do you think is positive in that and what needs more work?

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** The European Union has not made public the results of the first civilian monitoring mission that was put in place between October 2022 and December 2022. There will be a second one, but so far I haven't had access to the reports and the recommendations that were made. We're looking forward to that, but that concerns Armenia and Azerbaijan. That doesn't concern the line of contact in Artsakh. Those are two different issues. The European Union is not directly involved in any settlement regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, per se.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** So they're not involved in any of that resolution or—

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** They're involved in resolutions calling for the lifting of the blockade, and now the European Parliament is involved in a resolution that “considers that their replacement with OSCE international peacekeepers, under a UN mandate, should be negotiated urgently.” That's from yesterday or the day before. That's all very new. It's under way currently, so I cannot be more specific.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Do you see Russia's role diminishing in the region, especially in light of the Lachin corridor, or do you see it staying as the status quo?

What are your views on that?

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** So much depends on how quickly Russia weakens, and Russia is weakening very quickly. The other factor that is very important for Azerbaijan is the sooner the Russian peacekeepers get out of the way, the better. According to the tripartite statement of November 2020, the Russian peacekeepers will be there until 2025, at which point either party can ask for their removal. It's not both parties; it's either party. Azerbaijan has always made clear that it wishes for the Russian peacekeepers to go.

The year 2025 will be the maximum. Given the pace of Russia's weakening, it will probably be sooner than that.

• (1205)

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** How have the humanitarian assessments been in that corridor? Have goods been moving back and forth with respect to humanitarian needs, particularly in terms of food and shelter requirements, or have they been disrupted as well?

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** On this question, Mr. Sarai, I think my colleagues from Artsakh are so much better placed than I am.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Sure.

Go ahead, Mr. Mirakian.

**Mr. Shahen Mirakian:** No. She meant the people on the next panel.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** They're on the next panel. Fair enough.

In the November 2020 ceasefire agreement, or the trilateral agreement, it stipulated that the Lachin corridor remains under the control of peacekeeping contingent of the Russian Federation, and that Azerbaijan will guarantee the security of the movement of citizens, vehicles and goods in both directions.

Do you think Russia has been upholding that responsibility, or because of their own...? I know Ms. Papazian has said that...

Mr. Mirakian, do you think they have been holding that agreement, or do you think they are also lacking, as Ms. Papazian has said?

**Mr. Shahen Mirakian:** My personal view is that there was a period when movement was relatively unimpeded. There were still problems. There were still periods in the past during which gas and electricity were cut off. There were still temporary blockades from time to time. People were subject to searches by Azerbaijani government officials who were on the road. They weren't supposed to be doing them, but they were still happening.

However, for the most part, we can say this is a place where traffic had always moved poorly because of geopolitical considerations, for a long period of time, so it wasn't particularly that bad. Obviously, come December 12, 2022, we had a complete cessation of movement along the road. It was good and then it was bad.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Thank you.

Thank you, Chair. I think that's all. I think I'm out of time.

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

We next go to Mr. Bergeron.

You have two minutes. I would ask that you remain within the two-minute limit, because with the last question, you went considerably over. Thank you.

It's over to you, Mr. Bergeron.

[*Translation*]

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

As soon as the Lachin corridor blockade was set up, the Canadian government responded quickly by saying it wanted to monitor the situation closely, and called on the Azerbaijani authorities to reopen the corridor and ensure freedom of movement. The U.S. government did the same at the start, as did the European Union and France.

Do you feel that these governments did it to ease their conscience, but lost interest in the situation afterwards?

What do you think accounts for their silence since then?

[*English*]

**Mr. Shahen Mirakian:** I'm sorry. Was that question to me?

[Translation]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** The question is for anyone who wishes to answer it.

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** May I answer it?

• (1210)

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Please do.

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** I don't think they are moving on to other matters. I think, on the contrary, that things have been happening bit by bit since November 2020, but especially since September 2022, actually. Azerbaijan launched a major offensive against Armenia in September 2022. It lasted only three days, but during this offensive, Azerbaijan took strategic positions on Armenian territory. We are talking about several tens of square kilometres.

I believe that this event gradually made the international community aware of what kind of state Azerbaijan was and how it behaved in settling its disputes with its neighbour. Instead of using diplomacy, it constantly resorts to armed violence. The 44-day war, which I was going to say went completely unnoticed, took place in the middle of the pandemic. People had other things to worry about.

Now, I believe that here, on the contrary, something has begun and we have to keep working on it. We have to make the world more aware of what is happening in this region of Artsakh. If things continue like this, people who have lived in this region for countless centuries may soon be forced to either leave or die there.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Papazian.

Now we go to our last question.

Madam McPherson, you have two minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for providing this information for us today. It has been very helpful for us to get a better understanding of what is happening in the corridor.

I want to follow up on some of my colleagues' questions on the role that Russia is playing in this conflict. We've talked a little bit about how, obviously, Russia is very occupied with Ukraine right now with their illegal invasion there. We know they have an important role as peacekeepers and are currently being described by the Azerbaijan media as "occupiers". I'm just wondering if both of you could comment briefly on what impact you feel Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had on its peacekeeping role in the Nagorno-Karabakh and Lachin regions specifically.

**Mr. Shahan Mirakian:** Obviously, as we've heard, there's been a waning of Russian influence beyond its own borders in a large part of the world, whether it's here or in Syria or whatever. Obviously they have less ability to project force, or less desire to project force, and more need to have allies and to keep people happy and things of this sort.

Obviously it's very hard to look at the Russians as occupiers when a trilateral statement was made in which they agreed to have Russian peacekeepers there. I should also add that, as part of that trilateral statement, there was an agreement to have a peacekeeping monitoring centre that had Turkish troops in it. I don't see the Azer-

baijanis referring to those Turkish troops, who are at that monitoring centre, again far away from the line of contact but still there, as occupiers of Azerbaijan either. Obviously there's some moral judgment being made as to what the role of the Russians is and what they're doing there.

You can portray the Russians as bad, not that they need any help, but if they portray them as the bad guys and somehow for their consumption they're occupiers, they're hoping to get a better result from what they're doing, so I think there's part of that happening.

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

Ms. Papazian, do you have anything to add very quickly? I'm sorry that I haven't left you with much time.

**Dr. Taline Papazian:** That's not a problem.

The Russian peacekeepers have always had a major problem, which is that they don't have a mandate. Azerbaijan has always refused to sign a mandate. There is a declaration. They have signed the declaration providing for the peacekeepers, but there is no mandate. Therefore, the Russian peacekeepers don't really know what they can do and what they cannot do.

Since the war in Ukraine, the question is in a way less relevant because Azerbaijan has become so much more important. Even for the issue in Artsakh or the relations with Armenia, Russian peacekeepers have fewer incentives and less capability to really intervene and sort of go beyond the mandate, which they don't have, in order to protect the lives of people. We know what value human life has for Russia, so....

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

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

On that note, I would really like to thank, on behalf of the entire committee, Mr. Mirakian.

It was good to have you back, sir.

Ms. Papazian, thank you very much for your testimony.

Obviously, we appreciate full well your concern that the international community remain focused and engaged as these developments occur. I should say that your emotions were quite palpable but obviously quite understandable.

Thank you very much for your testimony.

We will now suspend for three minutes so we can switch to the next panel.

Thank you.

• (1210)

(Pause)

• (1220)

**The Chair:** Colleagues, welcome back to the second panel for our study on the current situation between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and more specifically with respect to Lachin road. In this hour, we have two witnesses who will be joining us: Mr. Robert Avetisyan and Mr. Gegham Stepanyan.

Thank you, gentlemen. Welcome.

We will start with Mr. Avetisyan.

You have five minutes for your opening remarks, sir. Once you only have 30 seconds remaining, I will raise a red sign. Could you kindly ensure that you wrap it up within 30 seconds of seeing the sign?

Mr. Avetisyan, the floor is yours. You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan (As an Individual):** Thank you.

Honourable Chair and distinguished members of the committee, I thank you for this opportunity to appear in this case of the blockading by Azerbaijan against Nagorno-Karabakh, where Armenians, indigenous Armenians, have been calling for relief from the blockading of Artsakh.

On December 12 of last year, a group of Azerbaijanis blocked the only road connecting Artsakh with Armenia and the world. For 45 days, the lives of an estimated 120,000 people have been severely worsening. Children and adult medical patients remain in critical condition and are suffering in hospitals from a lack of supplies and treatment outside the republic. People have died as a result.

Grocery shops and markets are almost empty. The Red Cross and the peacekeepers supply a fraction of the required products and medicines. A shortage of food has led to the closure of schools and other educational institutions across the area. To elevate the suffering, the Aliyev regime has cut the supply of natural gas and sabotaged and blocked the repair of high-voltage power lines, which provide much of our electricity.

This is a humanitarian crisis caused not by an economic downturn, a global pandemic or a natural disaster. This is, rather, a political disaster. Aliyev wants to decide who can live and who must have death. It is a political disaster if, in the 21st century, we witness medieval cruelty by a repressive regime toward people whose only crime is the desire to live in freedom, democracy and dignity.

The blockade is carried out under the guise of an environmental protest. Now, the regime in Azerbaijan is regularly criticized by human rights organizations for the brutal suppression of the freedom of assembly. Additionally, international environmental agencies confirm that Azerbaijan, especially its Caspian shore, suffers from massive areas of contamination from petrochemicals and other life-threatening pollutants, yet representatives of the same country will appear and try to persuade this committee and the Canadian public that a group of activists took the liberty of closing the road in a demand for environmental accountability. Predictably, they will voice allegations of misusing the road and will even argue that there is no blockade, yet it would—

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoyne, Lib.):** On a point of order, Mr. Chair. The interpreters are having a hard time.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Romanado—

**An hon. member:** Could we ask that he slow down?

**Ms. Sherry Romanado:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Mr. Avetisyan, could I ask you to kindly slow down for the interpreters so that they can interpret in a timely fashion? Given that I did interrupt you, I will give you 30 additional seconds for your opening remarks.

Thank you.

• (1225)

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Predictably, they will voice allegations of misusing the road and even argue that there is no blockade, yet it would contradict the reality and the conclusions by democracies around the world and major political and human rights organizations.

This committee, the Canadian government and the public deserve facts, not propaganda. The fact is that this is a humanitarian and political blockade by Azerbaijan that threatens catastrophic consequences for 120,000 people. The fact is that Aliyev denies control over the blockade and at the same time openly declares, “For whoever does not want to become our citizen, the road is not closed.... They can leave.” This is a sign of a looming ethnic cleansing that cannot be ignored.

Finally, the fact is that Baku has expanded its initial list of demands, openly committing to the starvation of our people should we continue to pursue our democratic aspirations. The blockade of Artsakh has a clear genocidal intent. It masterminds that indigenous Armenians have two choices: either to leave their historic homeland or to stay and die from starvation, cold or diseases. Paraphrasing the words of a renowned diplomat, Azerbaijan never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity for peace in the South Caucasus. Expansionism and ancient Armenian hatred still dominate its politics toward our people. The autocracy continues attacks against Artsakh and Armenia and constantly attempts to reinforce its stance and political image using benefits from exporting its main items: oil and corruption.

As Artsakh continues to struggle to protect its fledgling democracy, people resist and defend their right to live as a free and sovereign nation. We should not be alone in this fight, and we are not. We see who is ready to help during this struggle—our compatriots around the globe, including in Canada—and to inform their politicians about this crime against humanity. We've received with gratitude the statements by honourable members, as well as Minister of Foreign Affairs Joly and many others, calling for an end the blockade, yet we know that best intentions do not prevent the worst outcomes

We hope that concrete actions, including economic and political sanctions against Aliyev's regime, as well as humanitarian involvement through airlifts and other means, will ease the suffering of our people, help us overcome the current crisis and protect our inalienable rights and liberties.

Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King once said that it is what we prevent, rather than what we do, that counts most. We in Artsakh share with Canadians unconditional love towards our homeland, our rights and our freedoms. Let us unite in efforts to prevent another genocide against Armenians and to protect our shared world view, which rejects aggression, intolerance and hatred in any form or manifestation.

Honourable Chair and distinguished members of the committee, I thank you for your attention and look forward to your questions.

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

We'll now go to Mr. Stepanyan.

Mr. Stepanyan, I should say that we've been warned by the technical members of staff that they are detecting a bit of a connectivity challenge. It's not a question of your mike, but connectivity. We will give this a shot and hopefully members will hear you, but we'll have to see how it proceeds.

Mr. Stepanyan, you have five minutes, sir.

**Mr. Gegham Stepanyan (As an Individual):** Thank you very much.

Honourable Chair and distinguished members of the committee, I express my deep gratitude to you for caring about the fate of 120,000 people living in Nagorno-Karabakh and for holding today's meeting to learn about the dire situation on the ground.

I thank you for this opportunity to appear before the committee as the human rights ombudsman of the Republic of Artsakh, internationally known as Nagorno-Karabakh, and to inform you of the consequences of humanitarian—

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

I am sorry, but the interpreters tell us that the sound quality is not good enough.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Stepanyan, I'm afraid we're still faced with the same challenge of connectivity. Given these challenges, it's very difficult for the interpreters to do their job. As you know, we previously asked for your remarks to be submitted to assist them, but that was not possible in your case. We're going to have to go without your opening remarks.

We can no longer hear from you, I'm afraid.

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** Mr. Chair, could we ask the witness to submit his remarks in writing, so that they can be considered in our study?

**The Chair:** That's a good point, Mr. Oliphant.

• (1230)

**Mr. Gegham Stepanyan:** I can definitely send my remarks, but yesterday I passed the test and everything was okay with my connectivity. I do not understand the problem.

**The Chair:** That is what I have been advised by the clerk and the technical assistants here. Since you connected today, they have been detecting it. That is why I tried to flag it for your attention be-

fore you took the floor. They are maintaining that the challenge is still there.

Go ahead, Mr. Bergeron.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Mr. Chair, I would like to say two things to follow up on what Mr. Oliphant just said.

First, Mr. Stepanyan may be able to reconnect during the course of the meeting, so that reception will be better.

I would suggest he then stay with us and we can ask him questions. If the connection is still as bad as it was, he can send us his answers in writing. We could then benefit from his insights as we move forward.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Absolutely. It's a very good point, Mr. Bergeron.

Mr. Stepanyan, we are advised that this is an on-and-off challenge that we're having with connectivity with you. We would be grateful if you could kindly submit your opening remarks. Also, in the event you can hear us, you can certainly remain with us for the hour. If you have any reflections with respect to the questions that have been asked, please feel free to comment on any of the questions that are raised here as well.

Thank you. You have our apologies for this, but we have very little control over it.

I've just been advised by the clerk, Mr. Stepanyan.... We really want to have the benefit of hearing from you. Let's give this one more shot. If you turn off your video link, maybe that will improve your connectivity and we will have an easier time hearing you.

Could you kindly do that and then resume your opening remarks from where you dropped off?

**Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC):** Mr. Chair, on a point of order, I'm wondering, bearing in mind his connectivity issues, if he could make sure he speaks more slowly. That might help the interpreters also.

**The Chair:** Mr. Stepanyan, perhaps you could kindly speak slowly, turn off your video feed and speak into the mike. We certainly hope we can proceed with your opening remarks. Let's give it another shot.

**Mr. Gegham Stepanyan:** Thank you very much.

How is it now? Is it okay? Can I continue?

**The Chair:** If there are challenges flagged by the technical assistants, I will bring them to your attention. Thank you.

Please proceed.

**Mr. Gegham Stepanyan:** One hundred and twenty thousand people who love their home and whose fundamental attachment to their ancestral land is an essential part of their identity have been trapped in their homeland for 45 days, completely isolated from the world, having neither air nor land connection with the outside world because the only road is closed by a group of Azerbaijanis acting under the direction of the Azerbaijani government.

These inhuman acts have resulted in an effective siege of Artsakh. To further aggravate the situation and cause excessive suffering, Azerbaijan, taking advantage of its control over critical infrastructure coming from Armenia to Artsakh, has deliberately cut all the gas and electricity supply. People have no gas. They are being supplied with electricity for six hours on a rolling blackout schedule with very limited domestic electricity resources. This has negatively affected all spheres of people's everyday lives.

The blockade has caused a sharp shortage of all vitally important supplies from Armenia, which average some 400 tonnes a day. Over 45 days, 18,000 tonnes of vital foods were not imported into Artsakh. Food supplies are running out quickly, without being replenished.

To address the unfolding food crisis, the Government of Artsakh introduced a ration stamp system using state emergency reserves. The entire population, including vulnerable groups—30,000 children, 20,000 elderly and 9,000 disabled persons—are at high risk of malnutrition and starvation. The risk is extremely high for people who are in facilities with special diets—nursing homes, hospitals, psychiatric centres, etc.

The longer the blockade continues with life-saving medicine becoming unavailable, with hospitals unable to provide necessary heat and hot water, the more it contributes to the reduction of essential medical services to below minimum requirements.

There is an acute shortage of all necessary medications. Four hundred and ninety people have been deprived of the opportunity to receive necessary medical treatment due to the suspension of planned surgeries in all medical facilities. Only very few critically ill patients were able to be transported from Artsakh to Armenia with the help of the ICRC.

The humanitarian crisis that has been created has had irreversible consequences, especially for children. Since January 18, all 170 schools and 41 kindergartens in Artsakh have been closed due to heating and electricity supply problems and insufficient food supply, thus depriving almost 30,000 children of the right to an education.

The psychological trauma of the blockade is particularly acute for children whose daily lives have been brutally interrupted. Many children who received periodic examinations and treatments in various medical institutions in Armenia have been deprived of this opportunity. Parents are unable to find baby formula or baby hygiene supplies to organize proper care of their children.

Family members from Artsakh, Armenia and around 20 foreign countries are unable to reunite due to the closure of the road. However, the blockade is not only a humanitarian issue but also a barbaric form of denial, by autocratic Azerbaijan, of the fundamental human rights of the people of Artsakh and a denial of the people's right to self-determination and their right to live freely and in dignity.

As a member of a national human rights institution, I have constantly warned the international community about the crimes committed by Azerbaijan, not only during the 44-day war but also after the war. People including civilians were killed. Hundreds were subjected to attempted murder by Azerbaijani military forces. Agricul-

tural work was intentionally obstructed, and attacks aimed at creating an atmosphere of psychological intimidation and fear were purposefully carried out by the Azerbaijani authorities.

Azerbaijan's actions demonstrate that the autocratic regime of Azerbaijan continues to adhere to a coordinated, systematic and consistent policy aimed at keeping the population of Artsakh in constant terror and fear and creating unbearable living conditions. The goal of this policy is the ethnic cleansing of Artsakh and the complete exclusion of the people from their homeland.

Honourable Chair and distinguished members of the committee, the people of Artsakh have proven with their behaviour that they are loyal to the democratic value system and are ready to overcome any challenge for those values. We just want not to be alone. We expect you to sympathize with our suffering. We expect you to take responsibility for the protection of our rights and put an end to Azerbaijani impunity.

Thank you for your attention.

• (1235)

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

We now go to questions by the members. The first member is Mr. Hoback.

You have five minutes, sir.

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** Thank you, Chair.

If what I'm hearing doesn't jerk at your heart strings, I don't know what can. It sounds absolutely horrible.

What was the main occupation of these 120,000 people before the blockade? What type of work were they doing in this area? What was the main industry?

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** Is that question for me?

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** Sure.

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** Thank you.

Artsakh has traditionally been an agricultural country. We have nice, arable lands with lots of economic opportunities. Apart from agricultural life, we also reached a level of energy self-sufficiency before the 2020 aggression, when most of it was taken from us by Azerbaijan, Turkey and international terrorists.

We also have mining. The very issue which has been—

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** Let's boil in on the mining side of it. How big a part of your economy is it?

There are claims that are being made by these eco-blockade folks. I'll call them that for a lack of a better word. How real is that issue with regard to what they're claiming?



• (1240)

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** Mining has been something of a post-Soviet branch of our economy. It has been developed into a big industry and a big chunk of our state budget incomes. It provides about 30% of our income now, especially when we have difficulties with arable lands, green energy production and other items of the economy. It has been, since day one, implemented with the high standards of our environmental organizations.

Artsakh has always been sure in the absolute groundlessness of statements and accusations from Azerbaijan that there could be any environmental concern.

Additionally, we are also open to any international commission that would be unbiased and objective, and that can join us. We know that Canada also has big industrial activities in mining, so we can join efforts in making sure that what is really happening is delivered to you and that the information is credible, rather than allegations from Azerbaijan.

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** If we were to bring in a third party to verify the economic and environmental impacts of these mines, do you think that would be recognized by those who are participating in the blockade?

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** Hopefully, but unfortunately, as of now, Mr. Hoback, Azerbaijan has expanded the demands, as I said in my testimony. They went all in. They expanded it with knowingly inadmissible political demands, which are probably cherished in Azerbaijan, but they would be very dangerous for us. It would be the beginning of the end for Artsakh as a country, as a democracy and as an Armenian presence and civilization there.

Our government has reached out to the international community with the invitation to organize an objective international mission to address any concerns by Azerbaijan or any other stakeholder on this issue that an environmental stakeholder can have.

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** How do you find the Russian peacekeepers on the ground? Are they effective and efficient? Are they respected?

How do you see that functioning?

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** I had the opportunity to follow the previous panel. This issue was covered by our colleagues in the first session.

There are several issues and restrictions in place. We're speaking about 2,000 soldiers with an unclear international mandate, without any opportunity or regulation to impose any coercion or force if there's any disturbance. The 2,000 people are called there to protect 154 kilometres of border between Artsakh and Azerbaijan. We know that this is not a significant number. We know that more effective peacekeeping will demand more boots on the ground and a clear international mandate.

This is one of the reasons why we have also been calling for the internationalization of the peacekeeping effort. We want the world to have more of a say on this issue. We want Artsakh's security to be subjected to a more consistent international system of security.

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** Okay.

Then there was the comment you made that you were allowed to leave, and get through the blockade to leave, but you would never be allowed to return. Can you give me some evidence of what exactly is happening there? Who is making that decision? Is it these environmentalists or is it somebody else? Is it the peacekeepers? Where is that coming from?

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** Thank you.

I actually quoted Azerbaijan's president from his press conference of I think a couple of weeks ago, where he said, "For whoever does not want to become our citizen, the road is not closed.... They can leave."

That made it obvious to us that this is not an environmental issue and that the state has complete control of it, which kind of added to the set of other evidence. We know, person by person, that there are people from Azerbaijani security services. There are people who are soldiers who were participants of the 2020 aggression.

This is one of the manifestations of the demands, so the issue we're dealing with here is much more than just the environmental concern. The idea is to complete the de-Armenianization of Artsakh, an effort that has been there since pretty much the formation of Azerbaijan in 1918.

• (1245)

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

You're out of time, Mr. Hoback.

We now go to Mr. Oliphant for five minutes.

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

I want to take an opportunity in this round first to thank Mr. Bergeron for raising this issue as an important issue to deal with and also to make it very clear that the Liberal caucus members of this committee support doing this study. It's very important for us.

The nature of the study is to understand the humanitarian issues and perhaps crisis—I'm not prejudging anything—that is taking place in Nagorno-Karabakh at the present time and the plight of the people of that region. That is our goal today: to understand the nature of the humanitarian situation, to understand the nature of the blockade and to understand, on the ground, what is going on. That is the nature of what we're trying to do.

We recognize that it is within a long, protracted conflict that has gone on for a few decades and has gone through different periods of war, including most recently two and a half years ago. We recognize that it is an ongoing situation, and Canada supports a comprehensive negotiated political solution to that conflict over that disputed territory between Azerbaijan and Armenia. We want peace. That's our first goal.

We also are a country of the rule of law, and we follow an international rules-based order. As such, when it's clearly stated that Canada supports all UN Security Council resolutions on Nagorno-Karabakh, I very much want to reiterate that Canada respects Azerbaijan's territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders and its sovereignty. I recognize that some of our witnesses will not agree with that, but Canada's position is that we have accepted and we agree with the UN's resolutions on the situation, and we understand the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and its sovereignty. As such, Canada does not recognize other entities within those borders as a political entity. It shares that position with every other member state of the United Nations.

At the same time, we want peace. At the same time, we want to promote the non-use of force, territorial integrity and self-determination in resolving the conflict through a negotiated political solution. We want a continuation of dialogue outside this current humanitarian issue that we are studying today. We want all parties to continue to engage in meaningful dialogue and to have a positive constructive engagement over the process. That may happen through the OSCE process. It may happen through a Russian process. We are pleased to see that conversations are taking place between the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia, and Armenia and other countries, as a way ahead.

I wanted to get that on the record. Today we are dealing with a crisis that is real. We have been hearing enough evidence. We are trying to dig down more deeply to understand the exact nature of that, the options for it, the causes behind it, what is happening on that road, what supplies are getting through and what supplies are not getting through. Those could be food supplies, medical supplies, transport of ill people back to Armenia, and the electricity and power that may be coming through the corridor or other opportunities for power to get to the people.

With that being said... I'm taking the bulk of my time to make that statement. I don't usually like doing those statements because this is question time. However, I do want to make sure that—even though they will probably disagree with me—the witnesses have a chance to respond to my statement.

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** Thank you.

You raised a very important general question—that international law should also be applicable to Artsakh. Despite those Security Council resolutions that were adopted during the war with the sole purpose of stopping that act of aggression against Artsakh by Azerbaijan, they were not respected by Azerbaijan itself. Azerbaijan, in violation of all those resolutions, resumed attacks against Artsakh. We have to be clear on that. Otherwise, there will be no need to reiterate the general vision of the peaceful resolution of this conflict by so many resolutions.

We want Azerbaijan to adhere to the rest of the UN charter. The fundamental thing there is the right to self-determination. People have a right to self-determination. Self-determination is the right that has provided the formation of the treaty and much of the entire political map today. That is a process that is inalienable. It's irresistible, if you wish.

We also want to say that we deserve that right, because we did not fail in our quest for independence. We turned into a much more

democratic country, especially if you compare it with the autocracy in Azerbaijan.

As of now, we want Azerbaijan to adhere to the UN charter, the same way they always put forward as the argument in their favour, and end the blockade, which violates any UN article and violates the major conventions to which Azerbaijan is a co-signatory; to respect human rights; to respect international law; and to take these discussions, including political discussions, over the whole set of issues into a political field. Why should kids die while Azerbaijan is feeling just fine and referring to UN resolutions adopted 30 years ago?

No. We want Azerbaijan to behave internationally, which would be respect towards international law, towards the country's commitments to behave in a predictable political manner and towards their own people, who also deserve rights. What we see is autocracy—

● (1250)

**The Chair:** Mr. Avetisyan, I'm sorry. We're considerably over time. Thank you for your response.

We now go to Mr. Bergeron.

Mr. Bergeron, you have five minutes, sir.

[*Translation*]

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

I do not intend to comment on Mr. Oliphant's statement, other than to say that the recognition of the territorial integrity of a state does not exclude the possibility that there may be, within its borders, various levels of government. I think it is important to point this out here, since this recognition does not exclude the possibility that there may be various orders of government within the same state, Canada being a very good example of this.

That said, I would like to address Mr. Avetisyan.

According to what we heard from Ms. Papazian on the previous panel, the blockage, strictly speaking, is an act of war in contravention of the ceasefire agreed to between Armenia and Azerbaijan under the auspices of Russia. Nagorno-Karabakh President Haroutiounian went further, saying that what is happening now is an attempt at ethnic cleansing orchestrated by Baku, by Azerbaijan.

Quite simply, Mr. Avetisyan, what allows the president of Nagorno-Karabakh to make such a claim?

[*English*]

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** Excuse me. I have to admit that I lost the question while I was choosing the language channel. If it's not a problem, could you please repeat the question? I'm sorry.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Mr. Chair, I hope you will take into account that I have to repeat my question.

Ms. Papazian, who was on the previous panel of witnesses, said the blockade was an act of war in contravention of the ceasefire agreed to between Armenia and Azerbaijan under Russian auspices. Nagorno-Karabakh President Haroutiounian goes further, saying it is an attempt at ethnic cleansing by Azerbaijan.

Quite simply, what allows the president of Nagorno-Karabakh to make such a claim?

[*English*]

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** Thank you. That's a very comprehensive and very important question.

The statements by the Artsakh president and the political and human rights defender, if he had the chance to respond, are based on the consistency of efforts to make the lives of Artsakhis impossible. There is a clear intention, which has been present in the Azerbaijani political system, to de-Armenianize Artsakh. We have seen so many statements, which I will be more than happy to provide to the honourable members of this committee and to anyone you would deem appropriate, about how they need Artsakh without Armenians, and clear rounds of aggression, starting in 1988 when there was still the Soviet Union, and in 1991 and then in 2016, and in 2020 when they went so far as to also involve international terrorists. Those are the manifestations of a clear-cut and consistent policy by Azerbaijani authorities to de-Armenianize Artsakh. They need our home without us in it, and they have been pretty vocal about that.

Unfortunately, that is the political leadership we have on the other side of the negotiations. This blockade is one of the most vivid and recent manifestations of it, and I think that has become clear for the international community and all governments pretty much, which hope there will be civilized dialogue between Artsakh and Azerbaijan. We see that, no, the only intention is to starve us to death or force us to leave.

• (1255)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Mr. Stepanyan, you can of course add your comments to the answer just given by Mr. Avetisyan.

I would like to ask you, however, whether you have been able to return to Nagorno-Karabakh.

[*English*]

**Mr. Gegham Stepanyan:** Thank you very much for the question. It is really a very good and very important question.

In order to make such statements, one should put all the facts we face on the ground. After the establishment of the ceasefire, people were killed by Azerbaijanis. Eighty people were killed. Among them were three civilians, who were killed just because they were doing agricultural work on their land.

Azerbaijan was using all methods to intimidate the population of Nagorno-Karabakh or Artsakh—using loudspeakers, urging civilians to leave their homes, otherwise threatening through the use of

war, disrupting the normal functioning of infrastructure, obstructing agriculture—everything that would create unbearable living conditions and also push the people of Artsakh to come to the conclusion that it was no longer possible to live in Artsakh and they should just leave the territory.

While the whole world is pulling for the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, the president of Azerbaijan insists that there is no Nagorno-Karabakh, which means he is even refusing to accept that the territory has been called Nagorno-Karabakh for centuries and that it is still called Nagorno-Karabakh. They are demonstrating their intentions, their goal to implement ethnic cleansing and destroy everything that has been connected with Artsakh, with Nagorno-Karabakh, for centuries.

Coming to your second question, no, I have been stuck in Yerevan since December 12, 2022. I am unable to go back to my home to join my family. I am working from Yerevan. My partner is in Stepanakert in Artsakh.

I am receiving information, facts. We are implementing a fact-finding mission there, and I am receiving information from my office and trying to present it to the international community.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** President Aliyev—

[*English*]

**The Chair:** You have 15 seconds, Mr. Bergeron.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** I'll come back to this a little later, Mr. Stepanyan, but the question I'm about to ask you in a few minutes is about a statement by President Aliyev, who said that up to 400 Russian trucks passed along the road.

President Aliyev said that they were not protesting, that their aim was not the blockade. This bears witness to an orchestrated blockade or at least to orchestrated action by the government.

I would like to know what you think these 400 or so trucks contain. You could also confirm whether they actually transited through the Lachin corridor.

We'll talk about that later.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Stepanyan, could you answer in less than 30 seconds, please?

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** We might come back to this question later on.

**The Chair:** Sure.

• (1300)

**Mr. Gegham Stepanyan:** Excuse me, Mr. Chair. Is that a question for me?

**The Chair:** Yes, it was for you, Mr. Stepanyan.

**Mr. Gegham Stepanyan:** Okay.

Speaking about the arguments of the Azerbaijani side and President Aliyev about the traffic in the Lachin corridor, I can say that the Azerbaijani propaganda machine led by Aliyev is trying to show that the corridor is not closed. They present the numbers of how many cars have passed through the Lachin corridor since the beginning of the blockade. In one matter, they are honest and do not hide that during this period only Russian peacekeepers and Red Cross vehicles pass through the Lachin corridor.

I would like to present for your attention some statistical data on how many cars and how many people passed through the Lachin corridor daily before the blockade. There was an average of 454 vehicles daily, which for 45 days is equal to 70,600 vehicles, and more than 1,200 people daily were using the Lachin corridor—around 53,000 in 44 days.

Even the fact that patients in extreme condition are transported from Artsakh to Armenia accompanied by the Red Cross and the facts that very few humanitarian goods are brought to Artsakh accompanied by the Red Cross or Russian peacekeepers already speak to the fact that the corridor is closed. Free and safe traffic is impossible through the corridor.

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

We now go to Ms. McPherson.

You have five minutes.

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

For both of the witnesses, thank you for being here with us and for sharing this information. It's very important for the committee to hear this.

I would start with Mr. Avetisyan, who is the representative in Washington. I'd like to get a bit more information from you about the U.S. position on this crisis.

We have heard that Antony Blinken has spoken on this and has urged the immediate reopening of the corridor to commercial traffic. He underscored that the risk of a humanitarian crisis in the Lachin corridor undermines prospects for peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. I'm just wondering if you could comment on what you're hearing from the U.S. government and how they've offered to help.

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** Thank you.

Yes. Since day one, we have reached out, and when I say “we”, it is of course our office and all the organizations that have been actively involved in our cause and in supporting our interests in the U.S. and across the world. We—and the embassy of Armenia, of course—have reached out to both branches, the executive and the legislative, to inform them about the facts of the blockade and to ask for a level of pressure that would be sufficient for Azerbaijan to lift the blockade and to establish humanitarian action.

From the executive, you're completely right. We have heard many statements from top political levels, including the State Department, USAID and the Office of the President. The spokespersons of these bodies have referred to this question on various occasions and the demand is clear: to open the road, to lift the blockade

and to ensure unimpeded access for people, for goods and for everything that it was used for.

On the legislative side, we also have seen the very active involvement of the congressional groups that care about Artsakh and care about the human rights. You don't have to be pro-Armenian to care about this issue. You have to be pro-human and against aggression.

We have seen various members of the parliament reaching out to their authorities and to the executive authorities with a demand to take concrete action and to make sure that the voice of the U.S. is heard in Azerbaijan in a proper manner, because you probably also know that the U.S. is one of the countries that has been dealing with our situation since 1992 as one of the co-chairs of the OSCE group, along with France and Russia. There is a level of responsibility in any major capital, which, again, is rejecting aggression, rejecting genocide and is pro-peace, just like your colleague mentioned. That's pretty much the same agenda as ours.

We're very pleased that this agenda is absolutely shared by the Armenian sites in Armenia, in Artsakh and in the international community—the U.S., Russia, France and all the democracies, like Canada, I'm sure. The only site, the only country, that is opposing this is Azerbaijan. Of course, they're using their political resources—also, Turkey and paid lobbyists and everything.

Yes, we have seen it, but unfortunately we expect that the level will be deficient to lift the blockade. As of now, it did not go there, but we feel that this is a question in the focus of the U.S. authorities. We'll make sure that they continue to receive up-to-date information and will keep the pressure on. This is a global issue. This is not only an issue of the 120,000. This is a civilizational issue.

• (1305)

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you very much for that information. That provides some clarity for us.

My next question is for Mr. Stepanyan, as the human rights representative. I do hear what you're telling us about what's happening on the ground. It is horrifying, of course, to hear that 30,000 children are not able to attend school and to hear about the food rationing and the lack of medical care.

Canada has a feminist government. We talk a lot about having a feminist foreign policy. We certainly have a feminist international assistance policy. I'm wondering if you could describe what the gendered impacts have been of the blockade and how women are experiencing this humanitarian crisis in the region differently from men.

**Mr. Gegham Stepanyan:** The entire population is facing the same problems in terms of the availability of food, medication and many other issues. You very rightly pointed out that in this situation the rights of women should also be very clearly observed and monitored to ensure the proper realization of their rights.

I can say that my office is getting alarms from women, in that they cannot find necessary hygiene supplies. Mothers are saying that they are unable to find hygiene products for their children to organize necessary care for them.

I mean, the total blockade and the total humanitarian catastrophe, first of all, hits those who, especially in the context of conflict, are in very vulnerable groups and, of course, women in Nagorno-Karabakh, in Artsakh, are facing all the shortcomings and all the problems that women in general face in conflict zones.

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

Mr. Chair, I think that's my time.

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

We now go to the second round. Each member has three minutes.

Yes, Mr. Oliphant.

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** On a point of order, could I ask about our timing on this? I thought the meeting was to be until one o'clock.

**The Chair:** Yes. We will be finishing up in nine minutes, because each member has three minutes.

We will first go to Mr. Epp.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Mr. Chair, I'm sorry to interrupt, but that would be 12 minutes.

**The Chair:** No. You and Mr. Bergeron have a minute and a half each.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Okay. Thank you for that clarity.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Epp, you have three minutes, sir.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for bringing testimony to the horrific situation on the ground. I will be splitting my time with my colleague Mr. Dalton.

Very quickly, Mr. Avetisyan, the acceptance of the Russian peacekeepers is not held by all parties. From your perspective, who, if anyone, should be stepping in to protect the peace and protect that corridor? What would be your recommendation to the international community for a peacekeeping force that would be acceptable to all parties in this dispute?

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** Thank you.

That's a very interesting question. I think in certain situations, even if that peacekeeping force is not suitable for the aggressor, that should be disregarded. We expect a much larger international involvement in this within the OSCE and within the United Nations on a bilateral level, which will make sure that we have a sufficient number of peacekeepers with a clear international mandate. That will already be a deterring factor for the other side, in our case for Azerbaijan—that any opposition or any attempt to breach the assumed obligations will face strong international opposition and international punishment, if you wish.

We need a larger number of peacekeepers. We need a clear international mandate. We're open to co-operation with any international structure or government willing to step up and make our security guarantees much more sustainable and much more predictable.

• (1310)

**Mr. Dave Epp:** Thank you.

I'll pass it to my colleague Mr. Dalton.

**Mr. Marc Dalton:** Thank you to the witnesses for their presentations.

I'm wondering if both of you, if you have the chance, could make a comment on the impact of the Liberal government's positions and some of the decisions they've made on this whole conflict. I'm thinking of two things specifically. One is the transfer of drone technology to Turkey, which actually impacted the balance of power between Azerbaijan and the enclave. Could you comment on that?

Next, this is more to do with LNG and fossil fuels. There is a reliance here, especially with Russia closing its doors on a lot of its exports to Europe. They need Azerbaijan. Europe is calling, asking Canada to come in with its exports, and we're just kind of waffling on that. I guess my question here is whether, if Canada exported more oil and facilities, that would cause less dependence on Azerbaijan, between Europe and that, and maybe moderate some of the tensions there. Could you comment on that?

I'll leave that to both of you. Thank you.

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** Thank you, sir.

Referring to the first part of your question, it absolutely was crucial that Canada sent a political and economic signal to Turkey that its involvement, along with terrorists on the side of Azerbaijan, against Artsakh and Armenia was not tolerable. We've seen disruption in that supply, for which we are very grateful, despite the economic troubles. We hope this issue will be considered outside of any sort of partisanship. This should be on the general political agenda, because we know that all political parties in Canada are for peace, for human rights and for democracy. You're strong enough to resist any discrepancies on that end. We certainly see that, and we appreciate it.

Regarding the LNG and the energy source, again, the issue for us is, in principle, to make sure that our lives don't depend on economic interests and don't depend on which country is interested to come for the next decade, or 15 years, or one year. We don't know what will happen in the near future. We want our questions, our rights and our lives to have the same level of international attention and protection as the life of a very ordinary Canadian, an ordinary American or an ordinary person from France and any other country that has been protecting and appreciating human life and human dignity and security.

Yes, you're absolutely right that there are new economic prospects for Azerbaijan. They are now capitalizing on the war in Ukraine and other bilateral and multilateral arrangements. They are temporary, but the damage that is being done to those countries and structures will be much longer. We hope it will not jeopardize our freedom now, our security now and, pretty much, our lives. They can do business, but it should not be an instrument for killing other people.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you. We now go to Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Sarai, you have three minutes.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Thank you, Chair.

In response to Mr. Dalton's question, I just want to remind the witnesses that, under a Harper Conservative government, no LNG projects were approved for 10 years, and two of the largest—and one of the largest projects ever in Canada, the Kitimat LNG project—has been approved and is being built in—

**A voice:** It was approved by Harper.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:**—Canada along with a wood fibre LNG project. Both are export facilities for LNG, and these were done well ahead of unanticipated events out there. I want to remind everyone about what Mr. Avetisyan said: This is a non-partisan effort to resolve this conflict and we should stick to that response.

As for the Armenian government, which is kind of allied militarily with Russia through the Collective Security Treaty Organization, it has expressed its frustration with the inaction of Russian peacekeepers. I think the Prime Minister of Armenia has said the peacekeepers are a “silent witness” to Azerbaijan's efforts to depopulate Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. On January 10, 2023, it also cancelled, I think, the military shared drills it was supposed to do later in that year.

How has Russia's response to that corridor blockade affected its relationship with Armenia?

That's for Mr. Avetisyan.

• (1315)

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** Thank you, sir.

I know you will be having Armenia's ambassador, Madam Harutyunyan. You will probably receive a more comprehensive answer from her.

I just want to reiterate that the co-operation is on every possible level. We are especially interested in every possible opportunity, every door of opportunity, to raise questions and engage in a constructive dialogue. Despite this problem—and we kind of covered the main political and organizational difficulties with that—we hope that one of the main roles the peacekeepers will continue to play is with respect to the non-resumption of large-scale hostilities, because Azerbaijan feels the vulnerability of the Armenian side and they try to capitalize on it and to act, under the law of the jungle, to force its political choice.

We do hope the peacekeeping effort now will prevent that from recurring, just as has been happening so far. For the rest, I ask that

you address that question to Madam Ambassador. She will be authorized to give you a more comprehensive and correct answer.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Just briefly—and maybe I'll also ask her—do you think the UN Security Council will enact more measures, as they did meet in December 2022? Do you think they will be an effective tool for this as well?

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** We certainly hope so. We have seen attention by the UN Security Council, and there was a very comprehensive and sobering, I would say, discussion of this issue. Many of the democracies stood for and pretty much defended the right of Artsakhis to have our lives.

There was a discussion, a very heated discussion, predictably with differences in views. We had this one round of discussions. We hope this one will take it several steps further, because we need action. I would love to reiterate to you and to everyone that we need to feel the urgency of the situation. Every day that passes takes a human toll on our people, on regular people.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Thank you.

That's all, Chair.

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

We now go to Mr. Bergeron.

Mr. Bergeron, you have a minute and a half, sir.

[*Translation*]

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

As the discussion has already begun, this should go fairly quickly.

I would like to follow up with Mr. Stepanyan on the discussion we had regarding the alleged 400 Russian trucks that have reputedly crossed the Lachin corridor since the blockade began.

First, did 400 Russian trucks really pass through the corridor?

Do you have any idea what is in those 400 trucks?

[*English*]

**Mr. Gegham Stepanyan:** It seems that I have already answered that question, but I will try to provide more details.

Yes, the Artsakh government also states that the only parties—the only trucks—that are allowed to pass through the Lachin corridor are those of Russian peacekeepers and some Red Cross vehicles.

About the content of the trucks, I can say that a very limited amount of humanitarian aid—mainly medication and some food—was delivered through the Russians and through the Red Cross, but it is not enough to meet the local demand. It doesn't in any way correspond to the local demand.

Also, we should note that the Russians have 2,000 people in Artsakh—in Nagorno-Karabakh—and these trucks are also providing supplies for their contingent.

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

We now go to Ms. McPherson for the last minute and a half.

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

A minute and a half is a very short amount of time to ask questions, so I think I'll take this last bit to offer our witnesses an opportunity to provide some feedback to the committee. Is there anything that we haven't heard from you or anything else you'd like to tell Canadian parliamentarians so that we have a more fulsome grasp of what is happening within the corridor at this time?

Perhaps I could start with you, Mr. Stepanyan.

• (1320)

**Mr. Gegham Stepanyan:** Thank you very much.

I just want to add that fortunately all influential human rights organizations—namely Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Freedom House—have raised the alarm about the dire situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, in Artsakh, and are urging the Azerbaijani government to leave the blockade and to guarantee the freedom of movement of goods and people.

I just want you to also get acquainted with statements and reports that have been provided by international human rights organizations in your daily decision-making, especially concerning this issue.

Also, I would like to ask for help to try to have an international fact-finding mission on the ground, which will definitely help me as an ombudsman and human rights defender to collect more facts and present more information to the wider international community.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Avetisyan.

**Mr. Robert Avetisyan:** Thank you very much.

I would like to reiterate our gratitude to you and to everyone who has been on this call. Thank you for the attention.

Please don't feel detached. This question is of utmost importance for tens of thousands of Canadian Armenians, and it should also be on the agenda because Canada is very well known across the world for its championship of human rights, liberties and democracy. Canada is one of the countries that have recognized the Armenian genocides and one of the parties to prevent another genocide.

We invite Canada to play a much more active and comprehensive role in preventing a humanitarian catastrophe in Artsakh and in preventing another manifestation of Armenian genocide, and to use whatever resources possible to ease the humanitarian pains of the local population.

As well, it is one thing to try to bypass the blockade, but we also need your assistance, your effort and your authority around the world and in international organizations to break that blockade. That is the most important thing for us.

Thank you. I know you have a very loaded political agenda. I wish you good luck in your discussions.

**The Chair:** On that note, allow me to thank you, Mr. Avetisyan and Mr. Stepanyan. We're very grateful for your time, your perspectives and your testimony.

We will now adjourn the committee until two o'clock. Thank you.







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