

Statement by the Commissioner for Human Rights (Ombudsman) of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the occupation of Shusha

The purpose of the policy of ethnic cleansing, deportation and genocide deliberately pursued by Armenian nationalists and their supporters against Azerbaijanis for more than two centuries has been to drive our compatriots from their historical lands and establish a state of "Greater Armenia" in these territories.

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, thousands of Armenian families were relocated from Iran and Turkey to Karabakh, Nakhchivan, Zangazur, the Erivan Governorate and other regions, which are historical lands of Azerbaijan.

As a result of the next policy of military aggression launched by Armenia in 1988, Armenia occupied the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, an integral part of Azerbaijan, as well as seven surrounding districts. Thus, 20 percent of our country's territory was seized, more than 20,000 Azerbaijanis were killed, 50,000 people were wounded, thousands of people went missing, women, elderly people and children were taken captive and hostage and subjected to brutal torture, while one million of our compatriots were displaced and became refugees and internally displaced persons, with their rights being massively and grossly violated.

During this occupation, Armenian nationalists and terrorists perpetrated acts of genocide in the Azerbaijani city of Khojaly, as well as in Karkijahan, Malibeyli, Gushchular, Garadaghli, Aghdaban and other settlements.

Twenty-five years have passed since the occupation of the city of Shusha, which was an integral part of that policy of occupation, resulted in gross violations of the norms and principles of international law and human rights, and which is historically regarded as the cultural cradle of Azerbaijan, is rich in historical monuments, and has produced prominent figures, writers, poets and musicians who introduced the rich cultural heritage of our people to the world.

On 8 May 1992, the Armenian armed forces occupied the city of Shusha. During the fighting for the defence of the city, 195 local residents were martyred, more than 165 were wounded, and 68 people were taken captive and hostage.

During the occupation, Armenian vandals looted museums containing thousands of exhibits, destroyed hundreds of historical and cultural monuments, desecrated sacred shrines and mosques, destroyed numerous rare manuscripts, and reduced educational and healthcare institutions to ruins.

The 24,900 residents living in the city of Shusha, which covered an area of up to 300 square kilometres, were forcibly displaced and became internally displaced persons following the occupation.

However, the tragic consequences of this aggression are not limited solely to the seizure of Azerbaijani territories. The Shusha History Museum, which housed nearly 5,000 exhibits; the branch of the State Carpet Museum; the Karabakh State History, Folk Applied Arts and Local History Museums; as well as the palace of "Khan's Daughter," the renowned poetess Khurshidbanu Natavan; the castle of Aghabeyim Agha; the Shusha Fortress; the Karabakh Khanate complex; the madrasa of Ibrahim Khalil Khan; the Juma Mosque; the Azykh Cave, dating back to the Paleolithic period and considered an archaeological monument of world significance; and the exhibitions of other cultural institutions and art galleries were destroyed and looted, while libraries were burned.

Incidentally, as early as 1977, on the initiative of our National Leader Heydar Aliyev, a decision was adopted to declare part of the city of Shusha a historical and architectural reserve. Extensive improvement and reconstruction works were carried out in this city, which is renowned for its unique natural environment and as a centre of recreation and tourism. House museums dedicated

to the great figures of Azerbaijani culture and art, Uzeyir bey Hajibeyli, Khurshidbanu Natavan and Bulbul, were established; a mausoleum was erected for the prominent poet Molla Panah Vagif; and monuments were built to these world-renowned masters of literature and the arts.

However, as a result of the occupation, Armenian nationalists, who targeted not only human lives but also monuments, did not content themselves with inflicting a moral and psychological blow on the population of Shusha and our people and opening fire on civilians; they also riddled with bullets the statues of world-renowned masters of Azerbaijani art located in the city.

At the same time, a few days after the occupation of Shusha, Armenian armed forces launched an offensive from the area of the city known as Turshsu and from the direction of Armenia's Goris district and, on 18 May 1992, also occupied the Lachin district, which is part of the territory of Azerbaijan. As a result, they seized the Lachin corridor, which they had been planning to capture for many years.

It should be noted that, as a result of the occupation of this district, towns, settlements and villages, industrial, agricultural, healthcare and cultural-educational facilities, schools, as well as more than 200 historical monuments, including the Aghoglan Temple, together with the folk theatre and the local history museum, were looted and destroyed.

Taking advantage of the existing climate of impunity, Armenian nationalists demonstrated further disregard for international law by changing numerous toponyms and conducting archaeological excavations at hundreds of ancient graves dating back to the Bronze Age located around the city of Shusha. They have been demolishing graves and looting gravestones in the occupied Azerbaijani territories and plundering temples in the occupation zone.

The Republic of Armenia continues, before the eyes of the entire world, to engage in the mass destruction of Azerbaijan's unique cultural heritage. Thus, in the occupied territories of our republic, 927 libraries, 464 historical monuments and museums of world and national significance, more than 100 archaeological sites, six state theatres and concert studios have been destroyed.

More than 40,000 valuable objects and rare exhibits have been stolen from the looted museums. A number of local history museums have been razed to the ground; gold and silver jewellery, carpets woven in previous centuries, and other valuable exhibits have been transported to Armenia. The fate of the famous History Museum in Shusha has been the same.

The Republic of Armenia, grossly violating the provisions of the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and the Paris Convention on the Illicit Circulation of Cultural Property, is engaged in the looting of Azerbaijan's cultural heritage.

Armenian nationalists, who systematically and consistently appropriate our rich examples of folklore, music and literature, are in fact extending their war of aggression into the sphere of cultural heritage, appropriating the works of Azerbaijani composers as well as our folk songs and dances.

Numerous appeals have been made to the World Intellectual Property Organization concerning Armenia's unlawful acts. Unfortunately, this policy of occupation and terrorism has been taking place for many years before the eyes of the international community.

However, under the norms of international law, the inviolability of State borders must be respected, and violations of territorial integrity and sovereignty are impermissible.

Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and its jurisdiction over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh have been repeatedly reaffirmed by the United Nations, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, as well as other influential international organisations and all States.

However, the Republic of Armenia disregards the norms of international law and the position of the international community.

The occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region and the surrounding districts are an integral part of the territory of Azerbaijan. Although the UN Security Council adopted four well-known resolutions calling for the unconditional liberation of our country's occupied territories; the UN General Assembly adopted the Resolution of 14 March 2008 entitled "The Situation in the Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan"; the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) adopted Resolution 1416 of 2005 and Recommendation 1690, confirming that Azerbaijani territories had been occupied by Armenian military forces and that the Nagorno-Karabakh region was being administered by separatist forces; and the European Parliament adopted a resolution on Nagorno-Karabakh on 23 October 2013, Armenia has still not implemented these instruments.

The aforementioned resolutions unequivocally demanded that Armenia withdraw its military forces from the Azerbaijani territories it had occupied and enable one million Azerbaijani refugees and internally displaced persons to return to their native lands.

Upon its admission to the Council of Europe, Armenia assumed a number of obligations on the basis of Parliamentary Assembly Opinion No. 221, including the obligation to continue its efforts to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict exclusively through peaceful means and to settle international and domestic disputes through peaceful means and on the basis of the principles of international law, without resorting to or threatening to use force against its neighbours.

However, the Armenian side, by demonstrating an unconstructive position, fails to fulfil these obligations, obstructs the establishment of peace in the region, and repeatedly violates the ceasefire regime.

Thus, in the first days of April 2016, the Armenian armed forces suddenly launched large-scale intensive shelling from the occupied territories of Azerbaijan and from the territory of the Republic of Armenia, targeting Azerbaijani territories, numerous settlements inhabited by civilians in frontline areas, schools and other social facilities, as well as the positions of the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan along the line of contact, using heavy artillery and large-calibre weapons.

As a result, civilians, including children, women and elderly persons, were killed and seriously wounded. As a result of these provocations, the provisions of international instruments, including the Geneva Conventions, were grossly violated, as was also witnessed by foreign journalists who visited our country.

All of this is taking place in the 21st century before the eyes of the international community, which has attained a high level of cultural development.

We firmly state that unless every act of vandalism, separatism, nationalism and terrorism is given an appropriate legal and political assessment, all of humanity will remain under threat.

In recent times, the international community has increasingly supported Azerbaijan's just position and is interested in resolving the problem through peaceful means within the framework of international law. Incidentally, the parliaments of 14 States have already recognised the Khojaly genocide perpetrated by Armenians on 26 February 1992 in accordance with the norms of international law. Furthermore, relevant resolutions have also been adopted by the legislative bodies of 21 states of the United States.

As the Commissioner for Human Rights (Ombudsman) of the Republic of Azerbaijan, taking these facts into consideration, I declare that the violation of the territorial integrity of our country by the Republic of Armenia, the occupation of our ancestral lands, as well as the destruction and appropriation of architectural monuments regarded as masterpieces of world culture and unparalleled examples of civilisation, and the massive and gross violations of human rights, including cultural rights, are entirely contrary to the norms and principles of international law.

We call upon international organisations to support our just position in order to ensure that justice is soon restored, the occupied territories, including Shusha, are returned, the territorial integrity

of Azerbaijan and the massively violated rights of our one million refugee and internally displaced compatriots are restored, prisoners of war and hostages are released, and the perpetrators do not remain unpunished.

We hope that all influential international institutions and peace-loving people will mobilise their capabilities and make efforts to establish peace and security in the Azerbaijani lands, an ancient centre of culture and a land of tolerance; that an end will be put to the policy of aggression against Azerbaijan that has continued for many years; that real opportunities will be created to ensure the universally recognised fundamental human rights and freedoms of every person, including cultural rights, without discrimination on any grounds; and that the necessary conditions will be established for peace, sustainable development and constructive cooperation in our country and throughout the region.

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Statement

Sent to the Secretary-General of the United Nations; the UN Security Council; the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; UNESCO; the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation; the European Commission; the Council of Europe; the OSCE; the International and European Ombudsman Institutes; the Asian Ombudsman Association; ombudsmen of various countries; the embassies of the Republic of Azerbaijan in foreign countries and the embassies of foreign countries in the Republic of Azerbaijan; and Azerbaijani diaspora organisations.