

14 July 2008

Azerbaijan: IDPs still trapped in poverty and dependence

Almost 15 years after signing a ceasefire agreement, Azerbaijan and Armenia have yet to resolve the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. In the absence of a peace agreement, some 570,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) are still prevented from returning to their homes in Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani government has resettled more than 90,000 IDPs in new villages since 2001 and while this group lives in better houses, the land surrounding their homes is often infertile, there are few employment opportunities and some villages are located within kilometres of the line of contact with Nagorno-Karabakh far from other communities. The lack of consultation with IDPs prior to their resettlement and the fact that they have no secure legal tenure over housing in new settlements are also causes for concern.

IDPs who have not been resettled continue to live in accommodation varying from collective centres and mud shacks to abandoned apartments and the homes of relatives. Some live under the threat of eviction in informal settlements. In collective centres and mud houses, housing conditions are poor and plumbing and electricity infrastructure is lacking. The physical security of some IDPs is at risk since they live near the line of contact where there are frequent exchanges of fire. With few jobs in rural areas, many IDPs are dependent on government assistance and are migrating to the cities in the hope of finding work. Due to government policies aimed at preventing migration to cities or because their documents have been lost, some IDPs are unable to register their residence in the capital Baku, which prevents them from accessing jobs, services and entitlements such as medical care and pensions.

The resettlement process is ongoing, and the government in 2007 approved a programme to resettle some 75,000 further IDPs and to create new infrastructure and income-generation opportunities by 2011. While resettlement will improve the situation of these IDPs, a further 405,000 IDPs have yet to benefit from government resettlement programmes. International organisations are slowly leaving Azerbaijan, but despite waning donor support some continue to carry out projects to improve the living conditions of IDPs and offer suggestions on how the government can do the same. Further international support could be directed towards providing expertise on conducting comprehensive needs assessment surveys on themes such as health, livelihoods and education.

Background

The origins of the territorial dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh go back centuries. But the current conflict is based on the 1923 Soviet decision to allocate Armenian-majority Karabakh to Azerbaijan instead of defining it as an exclave of neighbouring Armenia. In 1988 armed conflict over the territory broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan – the former historically Christian, the latter Moslem – and people started fleeing their homes. By the time the period of intense fighting ended with the signing of a ceasefire agreement in 1994, Armenia controlled Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent parts of Azerbaijan, some 30,000 people had been killed and approximately 700,000 were internally displaced within Azerbaijan, most of them ethnic Azerbaijanis (NRC 30 April 2008; TOL, 16 October 2007). About 54,000 displaced people were later able to return to their homes as the Armenian army withdrew from some territory it had occupied, but Armenian forces still control most areas and displaced inhabitants continue to be prevented from going back (NRC, 29 February 2008). As of April 2008 more than 572,000 people remained internally displaced in Azerbaijan (Government of Azerbaijan, 3 April 2008).

A sustainable negotiated solution to the conflict appears distant in 2008. A 120-kilometre line of contact divides Armenian and Azerbaijani forces and skirmishes causing casualties continue to be reported. Negotiations within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group continue, though there has been no significant progress towards a peaceful settlement of the conflict. Azerbaijan insists on territorial integrity within its So-

viet-era borders, while Armenia refuses to relinquish control over the areas it occupies until mechanisms for determining Nagorno-Karabakh's future status are put in place. Meanwhile, both countries are significantly increasing their military budgets (ICG, 31 January 2008; RFE/RL, 4 March 2008; Government of Azerbaijan, 4 May 2007; EU, 17 January 2008), and some analysts have warned that they are edging towards a renewal of the conflict (ICG, 31 January 2008).

Living conditions of IDPs

IDPs in Azerbaijan live in various types of housing or other shelter in urban and rural areas, which ranges from railway wagons and mud shacks to schools and new houses. The main categories are collective centres (33 per cent), self-built mud houses (15 per cent), abandoned apartments (12 per cent), new houses (12 per cent) and lodgings with relatives (12 per cent) (Government of Azerbaijan, 3 April 2008). A 2007 UNHCR assessment based on group discussions with 860 IDPs in 47 areas found that poor living conditions and lack of infrastructure were the main outstanding problems of respondents, irrespective of their location, gender or age. Children and adolescents felt they needed more privacy, while disabled people, single mothers and orphans had little hope they would achieve living conditions that met their needs (UNHCR, 1 November 2007).

About 40 per cent of IDPs live in the main cities of Baku and Sumgait (Government of Azerbaijan, 3 April 2008). Most of this group live in multi-storey collective centres, many of which have leaking roofs and run-down kitchens, bathrooms and plumbing systems. Indi-

vidual households are separated but share a kitchen and bathroom with others on their floor. Families typically occupy one or two rooms with no separation of the sexes or age groups. Gas and electricity are supplied free of charge. Some families have managed to leave collective centres after building new homes or finding better affordable housing in the private sector. The remaining occupants therefore tend to be the most vulnerable (NRC, 30 November 2007). The government's 2007 programme proposed, among other activities, the further renovation of communal areas in collective centres and the resettlement in new housing of some IDPs in cities (Government of Azerbaijan, 31 October 2007).

About 70,000 IDPs have been squatting in private apartments (Government of Azerbaijan, 3 April 2008), mainly left by ethnic Armenians during the conflict. The Azerbaijani government has supported them and other IDPs with a resolution and decree recommending that the courts prevent the eviction of IDPs from their residences. Court judgements have mostly rejected applications concerning the right to reclaim occupied residences, confirming that this right will be suspended as long as the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh remains unresolved. However, in 2007 the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) upheld the claim of one owner of an apartment occupied by a displaced family, finding that the applicant had been denied peaceful enjoyment of her possessions (ECHR, 27 December 2007). The Supreme Court of Azerbaijan must now review this case, though the government has stated that the European Court's decision cannot supersede earlier decisions of local courts.

Government protection against eviction has not helped all IDPs. Businessmen have bought collective centres in Baku and reportedly evicted residents without adequate notice, consultation, compensation or alternative accommodation (AI, 28 June 2007). Other IDPs who fled to the Sumgait area fear they may be evicted at any time. After arriving during the conflict, they bought land from the municipal authorities and have since built houses and installed their own plumbing, communication and electricity infrastructure, but have still not been granted a formal title for the land. A local legal aid centre has brought this issue to the attention of the local authorities, who contend that they cannot issue land titles since the settlements are not in a residential zone (IDMC, 12 December 2007).

Outside of cities, IDPs live mainly in the central and western parts of the country near Nagorno-Karabakh. While the government has closed the worst settlements, some IDPs continue to live in improvised shelters of poor structural quality. They are built from materials such as mud bricks, rocks, frail sticks, cardboard and scrap metal all held together with wood and plaster. Houses are usually small and the roofs regularly fly off since they are not attached securely. Inside, the floors are covered with scrap material, but this does not protect against the entry of mice and snakes. With no heating system or proper windows, these shelters fail to provide warmth, ventilation, physical security or privacy. Many of these IDPs must also contend with a lack of potable water and gas, infertile land, and marginalisation as the isolated settlements often lack public transport links.

Displaced families who returned to their homes in Fizuli, near the line of contact, are also living in poor conditions. Upon return, they found their houses and property destroyed, the water infrastructure destroyed and agricultural land mined. Fizuli has the highest contamination of land mines and unexploded ordnance in the areas under the control of Azerbaijan; frequent exchanges of fire on the line of contact also put the physical security of returnees there at risk (ANAMA, 30 April 2008). Communal infrastructure has slowly been repaired as the government focus on these villages has increased. Only a minority of those who returned managed to obtain property deeds because property restitution or compensation mechanisms had not been put in place, procedures were too bureaucratic and fees were high. However, in some cases new property deeds were issued in a less complicated procedure. The 2007 government programme includes the repair of 1,500 houses in Fizuli district for returnees, and the government maintains the IDP status of returnees since they continue to live in a displacement-like situation.

Conditions in new settlements

To date, government programmes to improve shelter have mainly targeted IDPs in rural areas. Within the framework of the 2004 state programme for displaced persons, the government has resettled nearly 90,000 IDPs from the worst IDP settlements, offering them houses and small plots of land in 49 new villages which it has built since 2001 (Government of Azerbaijan, n.d.; NRC, 29 February 2008). In 2007, IDPs were moved to 16 new settlements in Bilasuvar, Fizuli, Aghdam, Sabirabad, Saatly and

Sabunchou districts, and three tent camps were demolished in Sabirabad and Saatly (Government of Azerbaijan, 3 April 2008). Displaced communities have been settled and resettled together to facilitate eventual reintegration in places of origin. Resettled IDPs also maintain their IDP status.

Despite these impressive efforts and improved housing conditions for most resettled IDPs, the new settlements raise several concerns. Many are located in economically depressed regions without public transport links and are often distant from other communities and administrative centres. A few are within kilometres of the line of contact and residents regularly hear fighting between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces (NRC, 29 February 2008; ICG, 14 November 2007; AFP 14 February 2008; IWPR, 12 March 2008; EurasiaNet, 26 July 2007). Some houses were constructed poorly and the land accompanying them is salty and infertile. There are few opportunities to earn an income and some IDPs are forced to leave the settlements and search for employment elsewhere. IDPs living in the new settlements explained how they would have welcomed the chance to state their opinion on the new villages beforehand (NRC, 29 February 2008; UNHCR, 1 November 2007; IDMC, 12 December 2007).

Another concern is that IDPs in new settlements have no secure legal tenure over their housing in new settlements. They were granted the right to use the houses and land until return to their original homes becomes possible, at which point they must return the houses and land to the government in the same condition in which they received them. They cannot

sell, sub-let or exchange the land and houses with another party, nor pass them on to their children, and they are not protected against eviction. There is also no written law on resettlement to clarify the legal basis for IDPs' residence in the houses (AI, 28 June 2007; Praxis 30 June 2007).

Further migration due to the lack of livelihood opportunities

Acknowledging that the lack of livelihood opportunities is the most significant problem for IDPs, and especially those in the new settlements, the government has introduced IDP employment quotas, financial credit schemes and income generation projects for IDPs (Government of Azerbaijan, 5 September 2007). However, these initiatives have not significantly raised the employment level of IDPs. The United Nations Representative of the Secretary-General on the Human Rights of IDPs (the UN RSG) agreed after his visit in 2007 that the main challenge related to internal displacement was the creation of livelihoods for IDPs, particularly in rural areas (UN HRC, 15 April 2008). Recent data on the employment level of IDPs is not available, but a 2003 government study showed 30 per cent of IDPs were officially employed (Government of Azerbaijan 2005, p. 47). Many IDPs included in this figure, such as administrative officials and their staff, teachers and other school staff and medical personnel, worked for the government before they were displaced and still earn an income from those positions (WB, 2004).

IDPs and returnees who were not public servants before they were displaced still struggle to find jobs or earn an adequate

wage. In rural areas, few IDPs are employed other than a small number working as factory workers, taxi drivers and small retailers. The majority of IDPs who returned to their homes live below the official poverty level and struggle to earn a decent income in agriculture. While they have better access to arable land than other IDPs, cultivation of this land is minimal because land mine clearance has been slow (NRC, 29 February 2008). Only a minority of IDPs own their homes and land and have been able to use their property as collateral for loan applications to start a business (DRC, 30 November 2007; WB, 2004, p. 71; AI, 28 June 2007). Unemployment rates among displaced women are generally higher than among displaced men, which has led to their social isolation and loss of professional qualifications (UNDP, 30 September 2007; UNHCR, 1 November 2007; UN HRC 15 April 2008). All of these factors combined have pushed many IDPs to migrate to cities.

IDPs seem to find jobs more easily in cities, but mainly in the low-paying informal market (UN HRC, 15 April 2008). Upon arrival, many struggle to register their new residence due to bureaucratic processes and corruption, because they lost documents when they became displaced and the overall government policy to prevent urban migration, which, while not designed to discriminate against IDPs, has a particular impact on them (UNHCR, 1 November 2007). Without residence registration, IDPs are prevented from accessing employment in the formal sector as well as government assistance, medical services, education and pensions. The government is reportedly revising legislation on the registration system to improve the rights of IDPs to freedom of

movement and choice of residence (UN HRC, 15 April 2008).

Continuing dependency on government assistance

Many IDPs have become increasingly dependent on direct government assistance. The government pays a monthly allowance of about \$11 to 530,000 IDPs, and provides regular food assistance to 270,000, distributes fuel and other non-food items and offers IDPs free communal services and higher education (Government of Azerbaijan, 3 April 2008; CoE, 20 February 2008). The displaced express their continued need for government allowances and pensions, even though they do not satisfy their basic needs or transform their overall financial situation, and highlighted that it was difficult to include newborns and newly married couples on government assistance lists (UNHCR, 1 November 2007; DRC, 30 November 2007; CoE, 24 May 2007). The UN RSG concluded after his 2007 visit that many rural IDPs “seemed to suffer from a dependency syndrome”. At the same time, however, he advocated that IDPs continue to receive assistance while they work to increase their self-sufficiency, since withdrawing it would put IDPs in a situation significantly worse than the resident population.

Sources differ on how the well-being of IDPs compares to the non-displaced population. DRC and the UN RSG agree that IDPs own less land, housing and livestock and live in worse housing than their non-displaced neighbours (DRC, 30 November 2007; UN HRC, 15 April 2008). While the UN RSG believed IDPs face unemployment on a similar level to the general population, DRC highlighted

that IDPs living near the line of contact are more often unemployed, access less land with less fertile soil and bring in less income than their non-displaced neighbours (DRC, 30 November 2007). Furthermore, while IDPs near the line of contact accessed electricity, heating and water on a level similar to the local population, fewer IDPs had land line telephones, sewage systems or gas supplies (DRC, 30 November 2007). The DRC view is consistent with a 2002 World Bank study, which found that IDPs were twice as likely to be unemployed as non-displaced people, and twice as likely to not have livestock (WB, 2004). However, this is in contrast to a 2003 government survey that found IDPs were less impoverished than non-displaced people, mainly due to direct government assistance (Government of Azerbaijan 2005, p. 47).

Education of displaced children

Displaced children can go to separate schools or integrated schools. The World Bank study found that in an attempt to preserve the social fabric of displaced communities, 60 per cent of the displaced were being taught in special classes segregated from the general population, but with the same curriculum and under the same educational system (WB, 2004, p. 100). Displaced parents can now choose to send their children to integrated schools or schools for displaced children. The UN RSG applauded this policy and supported a suggestion by the Minister of Education to study the level and quality of education of IDPs (UN HRC, 15 April 2008).

There are schools in most areas where displaced and returned children live, but

attendance is not effectively free. Internally displaced students benefit from free school bags, uniforms, books and stationery, as well as free access to higher education (UN HRC, 15 April 2008).

However, displaced parents report they do not always receive these items and so must pay for textbooks and clothing for their children (CoE, 24 May 2007; IDMC, 12 December 2007). A 2005 government survey showed that 58 per cent of displaced parents could not afford to send their children to school. There are isolated reports of students dropping out of school because of poverty, movement of families and early marriage in the case of girls (UNHCR, 1 November 2007; IDMC, 12 December 2007).

The quality of education is also a problem. Teachers are often displaced themselves and some suffer from psychological problems related to their displacement. They also reportedly need to update their professional skills (UNHCR, 31 October 2007). Schools in areas where IDPs live are in need of repairs, furniture, computers, supplies, playgrounds and additional qualified staff. While some schools received computers as part of the state programme, some teachers were in 2007 waiting to be trained on them before unpacking the equipment (IDMC, 12 December 2007). Despite these challenges, the literacy rate among IDPs is equal to that of the general population.

Health of IDPs and accessibility of health care

IDPs' health appears to still be affected by their displacement, though comprehensive reliable information is scarce. The UN RSG noted in 2007 that the dis-

placed suffered most from psychological stress, including trauma and feelings of insecurity and isolation due to war, poor living conditions and uncertainty about the future (UN HRC, 15 April 2008).

Elderly displaced people seemed to have additional and more serious health problems than elderly people who had not been displaced, because of difficulties adapting, lower family income and less care from their children (UN HRC, 15 April 2008). Returnees in Fizuli faced a lack of medical facilities, personnel, equipment and supplies (NRC, 29 February 2008). The government reported in 2007 that it had established a working group on the health of IDPs, though information on the work of the group was unavailable (Government of Azerbaijan, 1 November 2007).

Even though they are legally exempt from paying for medical treatment and most medicines, IDPs report that they are made to pay, and like all citizens they are subject to informal fees (UNHCR, 1 November 2007; DRC, 30 November 2007; IDMC, 12 December 2007; CoE, 20 February 2008). IDPs living near the line of contact spend more on basic medicine and medical services than their non-displaced neighbours, perhaps suggesting their health is worse than local residents (DRC, 30 November 2007). Few IDPs can afford advanced health services such as operations, and so more serious medical cases often go untreated.

National response and focus

The government has made considerable efforts to improve the situation of IDPs in recent years. In addition to the initiatives mentioned, it has established an institutional focal point for IDPs, and devoted

significant financial resources to continuing a resettlement programme, raising awareness of the internal displacement situation, developing a legal framework regulating the rights of IDPs, training government officials to implement the framework, and clearing land of mines and unexploded ordnance. The 2007-2011 programme for IDPs will cost \$1 billion and foresees further settlement of IDPs into new villages, the construction of more new infrastructure and the creation of work opportunities, among other activities. With \$12 billion revenue expected from oil and gas in 2008 alone, financial resources to implement this programme should be sufficient (Eurasianet, 13 May 2008).

Return to their areas of origin in and around Nagorno-Karabakh seems to be the desire of the majority of internally displaced people and the overriding aim of the government, in the case of a resolution to the conflict. The government acknowledges that return would only be possible after the comprehensive rebuilding of homes, infrastructure and the economy, as towns have been destroyed and infrastructure removed for sale as scrap (ICG, 11 October 2005). Any property compensation plan would need to take into account reports that only a minority of IDPs have documents to prove ownership of their previous houses and land. The government is in the process of preparing a Framework Plan on the Return of Displaced Persons, for which it has secured the support of some UN agencies and donors. However, with prospects for peace still faint, this plan will probably not be implemented in the near future.

International response and focus

In addition to the work of the government, UN agencies and international and local NGOs have worked to improve the situation of IDPs. In recent years, international assistance has largely focused on micro-credit programmes, skills training, food distribution and housing and infrastructure construction and repair. While many organisations have gradually reduced their activities in Azerbaijan with decreasing donor support, some continue to implement projects for the benefit of IDPs. In 2008, the World Bank committed an additional \$15 million for the IDP Economic Development Support Project. This will assist an additional 150,000 IDPs with infrastructure reconstruction and shelter repair. As part of a project aimed at strengthening the IDP protection capacities of governments in the south Caucasus, UNHCR has identified the main problems facing IDPs in Azerbaijan and proposed projects that could address them (UNHCR, 28 February 2008).

International organisations have also made recommendations to the government on the internal displacement situation. After his 2007 visit, the UN RSG encouraged the government of Azerbaijan to prioritise the creation of livelihoods for newly resettled IDPs, address the poor living conditions of IDPs in cities, and take action to end discriminatory practices in education. He also highlighted the need for reliable data to design an adequate response to the current conditions of IDPs, and recommended that people to be resettled are involved in the planning of the new settlements and receive information on the conditions awaiting them. Amnesty International

also encouraged the government to consult IDPs on issues that directly affect them, take steps to eliminate discrimination of IDPs, ensure the access of IDPs to health care and make sure that new settlements respect the right to adequate housing (AI, 28 June 2007). On leaving Azerbaijan in 2008, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) suggested that IDPs be included in general needs-based poverty reduction programmes. NRC also highlighted the need for a comprehensive policy for IDPs living in cities and called for consultation with IDPs when programmes are developed and implemented on their behalf. Following a survey of IDPs and host populations in border areas, DRC recommended a health survey of IDPs, increased housing ownership among IDPs, improved sanitary conditions in dwellings where IDPs live, better public transportation infrastructure and promotion of agricultural activities.

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and IDPs have been the subject of recommendations from the Council of Europe and the European Union. The Council of Europe continues to call on Azerbaijan and Armenia to peacefully resolve the conflict and recommended that the Azerbaijani authorities intensify their efforts to ensure that IDPs have decent living conditions and are helped to integrate where they are currently living. The Council also recommended that the Azerbaijani authorities look into any allegations of illegal occupation of private properties by IDPs and ensure that the owners recover their property or that adequate alternative accommodation and/or satisfactory compensation be granted to them. The Council also called for the residence registration system to be made more flexible to ensure that IDPs

have equal access to jobs and education, and that sufficient funds be allocated to medical care in IDP settlements (CoE, 20 February 2008). The European Union urged its Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) to conduct a needs assessment mission to Azerbaijan (EU, 12 September 2007), reminded the government that IDPs should not be used for political means in conflict situations, called for an improvement in the living conditions and social situation of IDPs, and urged the European Commission and EU Member States to continue to give financial aid to support Azerbaijan to improve the lives of IDPs and their non-displaced neighbours (EU, 17 January 2008). The International Crisis Group suggested the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus visit IDPs and assess conflict-related funding needs (ICG, 14 November 2007).

The government has clearly stated that it still requires and welcomes international support to develop institutional and technical capacity. Such support could include carrying out needs assessment surveys regarding livelihoods, health, education and economic opportunities for the displaced. Surveys on health would be especially important given the living conditions most IDPs continue to endure in collective centres. Support could also be directed towards collecting more information on labour migration of IDPs, obtaining data on areas of eventual return and developing programmes to improve living conditions and the integration of IDPs living in cities.

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's Internal Displacement profile. The full profile is available online [here](#).

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About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org

Media contact:

Kate Halff

Head of IDMC

Tel.: +41 22 799 07 03

Email: kate.halff@nrc.ch

Nadine Walicki

Country Analyst

Tel.: +41 22 795 07 37

Email: nadine.walicki@nrc.ch

IDMC

Norwegian Refugee Council

Chemin de Balxert 7-9

1219 Geneva, Switzerland

www.internal-displacement.org

Tel: +41 22 799 0700

Fax: +41 22 799 0701