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Submission to the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

Thematic Report on Enforced Disappearances and Memorialization

Submitted by:

The State Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Prisoners of War, Hostages and Missing Persons (STATCOM)

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I. Introduction

The State Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Prisoners of War, Hostages and Missing Persons expresses its appreciation to the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances for the opportunity to contribute to the preparation of the thematic report on enforced disappearances and memorialization.

The issue of missing persons remains one of the most complex and enduring humanitarian consequences of armed conflict. Enforced disappearances affect not only the direct victims but also have long-term psychological, social, and legal impacts on their families and communities. The absence of reliable information regarding the fate and whereabouts of missing persons creates prolonged uncertainty, often persisting for decades.

This uncertainty extends beyond emotional suffering. It prevents families from completing mourning processes, complicates access to legal recognition and social entitlements, and perpetuates unresolved humanitarian concerns within society. As such, enforced disappearances represent not only an individual tragedy but also a broader humanitarian challenge requiring sustained attention.

Addressing enforced disappearances therefore requires a comprehensive and long-term approach. Such an approach must encompass search, recovery, exhumation, identification, and return of remains, alongside measures ensuring respect for human dignity, support to families, and preservation of memory. These efforts must be supported by institutional frameworks that ensure continuity, accountability, and effectiveness.

The Republic of Azerbaijan continues to address the legacy of enforced disappearances through a structured approach guided by humanitarian principles, including respect for human dignity, the right of families to know the truth, and the importance of preventing recurrence. These efforts aim to resolve individual cases while contributing to broader post-conflict recovery and stability.

II. Overview of the situation

According to official data, a total of 4,004 citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan are registered as missing in connection with the Karabakh conflict. This figure reflects the scale of the humanitarian consequences of the conflict and remains a significant unresolved issue in the post-conflict context.

Of these, 3,998 persons went missing during the First Karabakh War, including 3,217 military personnel and 781 civilians. This distribution demonstrates that the consequences of the conflict affected both combatants and the civilian population, underscoring the broader humanitarian dimension of the issue.

The demographic composition of the missing persons further highlights the severity of the situation. Among them are 71 children, 287 women, and 319 elderly individuals. The presence of these particularly vulnerable groups reinforces the need for a sensitive and comprehensive approach that takes into account their specific circumstances.

In terms of gender distribution, 3,710 are men and 288 are women. While these figures reflect patterns of involvement in the conflict, they also indicate that its consequences extended across different segments of society.

In the context of the Second Karabakh War, 6 persons are registered as missing, all of whom are military personnel. Although limited in number, each case remains of humanitarian concern and requires careful consideration.

Despite sustained efforts, 3,703 persons remain unaccounted for to date, continuing to represent a serious humanitarian challenge, particularly for affected families.

At the same time, measurable progress has been achieved. The remains of 875 individuals have been located and exhumed, including 144 in 2025. Through DNA and forensic analysis, 301 individuals have been identified, including 77 in 2025. A total of 220 individuals have been returned to their families for burial, including 41 in 2025.

In addition, 32 mass graves have been identified, including 6 in 2025. These developments reflect ongoing efforts to clarify the fate of missing persons and restore dignity to victims.

Overall, the available data illustrate both the magnitude of the humanitarian challenge and the continued efforts undertaken to address it, underscoring the need for sustained and coordinated action.

III. Legal obligations of the State in the area of memorialization

The Republic of Azerbaijan recognizes that addressing enforced disappearances extends beyond the technical processes of locating, recovering, and identifying human remains. It also encompasses broader legal and humanitarian obligations related to human dignity, the right to truth, and the preservation of memory.

In this regard, the State approaches the issue of missing persons in line with its commitments under international human rights and humanitarian law. These commitments require the adoption of appropriate and feasible measures to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing persons, ensure the dignified handling of human remains, and support the rights and needs of affected families. Such obligations reflect a comprehensive responsibility to address the consequences of conflict in a consistent and sustained manner.

The right of families to know the fate and whereabouts of their missing relatives is widely recognized as a fundamental humanitarian principle. This right entails a corresponding obligation for the State to undertake effective, transparent, and continuous efforts to establish the truth, while ensuring that families receive accurate information and have access to relevant processes.

Within this framework, memorialization is understood as an integral component of the broader response to enforced disappearances. Although not codified as a distinct legal category in national legislation, it is closely linked to the State's obligation to ensure respect for victims and to acknowledge the suffering of their families. Memorialization contributes to preserving historical memory, countering denial, and reinforcing guarantees of non-recurrence.

The State facilitates memorialization initiatives, including those undertaken by families and civil society, ensuring that such efforts are inclusive, respectful, and consistent with national legislation and international standards. Judicial and administrative mechanisms support this framework through procedures related to identification, recognition of victims, and protection of burial sites and memorial spaces.

A balance is maintained between individual and collective dimensions of memory, recognizing personal loss while contributing to a broader societal understanding of the humanitarian impact of enforced disappearances. This approach supports social cohesion and post-conflict recovery.

IV. Practical and inclusive approaches to memorialization

In practice, the Republic of Azerbaijan has implemented a range of measures to ensure that memorialization is meaningful, inclusive, and aligned with the principles of dignity and respect for victims and their families. These efforts are closely linked to search, recovery, identification, and return processes, forming a coherent approach to addressing enforced disappearances.

A key component of this approach is the establishment of memorial sites and commemorative spaces dedicated to victims of armed conflict, including missing persons. These sites serve both as places of remembrance for families and as public spaces that preserve historical memory and acknowledge the humanitarian consequences of conflict.

Commemorative events further support these efforts by providing platforms for collective recognition. With the participation of families, State institutions, and civil society, such events contribute to acknowledging individual loss while maintaining public awareness of the issue.

Particular attention is given to the dignified handling of human remains. Following identification, remains are returned to families, and burial ceremonies are conducted in accordance with cultural and religious traditions. This process allows families to conclude prolonged periods of uncertainty and represents an essential humanitarian aspect of memorialization.

Efforts are also undertaken to document and preserve information on missing persons, including archival records, testimonies, and forensic data. This contributes to ensuring accuracy, transparency, and continuity, while supporting both identification processes and long-term preservation of memory.

The use of modern technologies, including DNA analysis and digital data systems, enhances the efficiency and reliability of these efforts. International cooperation further supports this work through the exchange of expertise and the adoption of best practices.

Memorialization efforts seek to balance individual and collective memory, ensuring inclusivity while contributing to broader societal understanding. Their sustainability is supported through institutional frameworks and continued public engagement.

V. Challenges and protection of memorialization efforts

Despite the progress achieved in the areas of search, identification, and memorialization, a number of challenges continue to affect the effectiveness and sustainability of ongoing efforts.

A primary challenge is the limited availability of reliable and comprehensive information regarding the location of burial sites. The absence of verified data complicates search and recovery operations, prolongs timelines, and increases the level of uncertainty in establishing the fate of missing persons. It also affects the ability to develop a complete and accurate account of past events, which is essential for both identification and meaningful memorialization.

The presence of landmines and unexploded ordnance in previously affected areas remains another significant constraint. This poses risks to personnel involved in search and recovery operations and restricts access to potential burial sites, thereby delaying both identification processes and subsequent memorialization measures.

Technical and institutional capacity also requires continued strengthening. The complexity of forensic identification, including DNA analysis and data management, necessitates sustained investment in expertise, infrastructure, and coordination mechanisms to ensure accuracy and credibility.

The prolonged psychological impact on families represents an additional dimension of the challenge. Continued uncertainty affects families over extended periods, underscoring the importance of combining technical efforts with broader humanitarian measures, including recognition and remembrance.

In this context, the protection of memorialization efforts is essential. Memorial sites and commemorative practices must be preserved in a manner that ensures their integrity and promotes respect for the dignity of victims. This includes both physical protection and the maintenance of public awareness.

Ensuring that memorialization remains inclusive and sensitive to diverse experiences is also important. Without such consideration, there is a risk that memorialization becomes formal rather than reflective of lived realities.

Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated approach that combines technical improvements, institutional strengthening, and sustained humanitarian engagement. Continued efforts in this direction are essential for advancing the resolution of cases and supporting the broader objectives of remembrance and social stability.

VI. Role of international cooperation

International cooperation plays an important role in addressing enforced disappearances and strengthening memorialization efforts. Given the complexity and long-term nature of the issue, collaboration with international and regional partners contributes to enhancing both capacity and effectiveness.

The Republic of Azerbaijan engages in the exchange of expertise, the adoption of advanced methodologies, and the alignment of national practices with international standards. This cooperation supports improvements in forensic identification, data management, and institutional processes, thereby increasing the reliability and transparency of ongoing efforts.

Engagement with international partners also contributes to building trust, particularly for families affected by prolonged uncertainty. The application of recognized standards and practices reinforces confidence in the processes undertaken and supports their credibility.

Multilateral platforms further facilitate dialogue and the sharing of experience. Initiatives such as the “Baku Dialogue on Missing Persons” provide opportunities for States, international organizations, and experts to exchange knowledge and promote coordinated approaches.

International cooperation also supports more efficient use of technical and human resources, which is essential for sustaining long-term processes, particularly in forensic work and data management.

Interaction with United Nations mechanisms, including the Working Group, remains an important element of these efforts, ensuring alignment with international norms and contributing to broader coordination.

Overall, international cooperation supports national efforts, strengthens institutional capacity, and contributes to the development of consistent and effective approaches to addressing enforced disappearances.

VII. Conclusion

The Republic of Azerbaijan reaffirms its commitment to addressing the issue of missing persons through a comprehensive and humanitarian approach grounded in respect for human dignity, the rights of families, and the prevention of recurrence.

Efforts in this area reflect the integration of search, identification, and memorialization within a broader framework aimed at addressing the humanitarian consequences of enforced disappearances. The progress achieved demonstrates the importance of sustained and coordinated action, while also highlighting the need for continued efforts.

Memorialization remains an essential component of this process, contributing to the preservation of memory, acknowledgment of suffering, and strengthening of societal awareness. In this regard, it supports not only remembrance but also the broader objectives of understanding and resilience.

At the same time, ongoing challenges require continued attention, including strengthening institutional capacity, applying modern technologies, and ensuring effective coordination at both national and international levels.

International cooperation will continue to play a key role in supporting these efforts, promoting consistency with international standards, and enhancing overall effectiveness.

Looking ahead, the Republic of Azerbaijan remains committed to advancing inclusive and sustainable approaches, strengthening support to families, and ensuring that the issue of missing persons is addressed in a manner that upholds dignity, promotes understanding, and contributes to long-term stability.