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PERMANENT MISSION OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA TO THE OSCE

**Address by H.E. Ararat Mirzoyan,
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia
on “The Continued Blockade of the Lachin Corridor by Azerbaijan and
Humanitarian Crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh” at the 1406th Special Meeting of the
Permanent Council**

17 January 2023

Mr. Chairperson,
Distinguished Ambassadors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to start by congratulating you, Mr. Chairperson, and through you my dear colleague, Minister Bujar Osmani, on assuming by North Macedonia of the Chairmanship of the OSCE and wish you all the success in your challenging endeavour of leading this largest security organization in times of unprecedented set-backs and crises in our common security area.

We welcome the human-centric concept of security which will be the guiding approach of the North Macedonian Chairmanship under the motto “It’s about people”. One cannot say better, since this organization has been established first and foremost to serve the interest of people and ensure their rights and security.

I assure you of Armenia’s support in all your efforts contributing to creating conditions for the people in the OSCE area to live in a more secure and safe environment.

I also would like to thank you, Mr. Chairperson, for convening this special PC meeting and giving me the opportunity to speak about the situation in our region and, particularly, the blockade of the Lachin Corridor.

Mr. Chairperson,

I wish I could have come here to the PC to talk about the achievements of Armenia in strengthening its democracy, human rights and the rule of law and the process of successfully implementing large-scale reforms from judiciary to police, from fighting corruption to improving social cohesion and justice. And believe me, I would have many things to say.

Unfortunately, the security crisis and challenges following the war of aggression by Azerbaijan against Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and the subsequent aggression and occupation by Azerbaijan of the sovereign territory of Armenia threaten the Armenian democracy undermining the efforts of the Armenian government towards bringing peace, stability and security to the South Caucasus region.

Since this is the first time that the Foreign Minister of Armenia addresses the Permanent Council following the 44-day war of aggression and occupation of Armenia's territory I would like to briefly reflect on the impact that this large-scale unprecedented use of force for the settlement of conflict have had in terms of perception of the OSCE, its principles and commitments, and its concept of comprehensive and indivisible security.

The 44-day war of aggression was accompanied by war crimes and widespread violations of international humanitarian law, targeting of civilian population and infrastructure, destruction of cultural heritage, which were not properly investigated and no one has been held accountable.

Throughout decades, the OSCE has been developing a set of tools, or the toolbox, aimed at early warning and conflict prevention. Unfortunately, it pains me to say this, but we have to recognize that the OSCE failed to apply this toolkit effectively and in a timely manner.

Furthermore, the absence of proper and robust reaction resulted in the impunity for the use of force as means of conflict settlement, in violation of the OSCE principles, commitments enshrined in its basic documents, leading to the legitimization of violence in the interstate and intrastate relations.

Following the signing on the 9 November 2020 of a trilateral statement on the cessation of armed hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh Armenia spared no efforts to achieve a normalization of relations with Azerbaijan and address the rights and security of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh. Unfortunately, the Azerbaijani side, instead of engaging in good faith into the negotiations, continues its destructive policy. Immediately after signing the Trilateral statement the Azerbaijani side violated the commitment on complete ceasefire and cessation of all military operations and launched an attack on Nagorno-Karabakh, which resulted in capturing of two more villages and the captivity of the Armenian servicemen. In May and November 2021 as well as in September last year the Azerbaijani side launched an aggression against the Republic of Armenia occupying around 150 sq km of the sovereign territories of Armenia. Today, with the blockade of the Lachin corridor the Azerbaijani side created a humanitarian crisis with far going intentions.

On 12 December 2022, a group of Azerbaijanis claiming to be environmental activists blocked the Lachin Corridor, the lifeline, the only road linking Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia and the rest of the world, thus effectively isolating the 120 thousand people in Nagorno-Karabakh, 30 thousand of which are children. Over 1000 people, including 270 children, are unable to return home to Nagorno-Karabakh. Some of those children are separated from their parents and were temporarily sheltered in Armenia.

From the very beginning, it was obvious that this blockade was a preplanned action directed and financed by the Azerbaijani authorities, using the cover of so-called “eco-activists” for plausible deniability.

These actions of Azerbaijan constitute an overt breach of paragraph 6 of the 9 November trilateral statement, which clearly indicates and I quote: “The Lachin Corridor shall remain under the control of the peacekeeping contingent of the Russian Federation; the Republic of Azerbaijan shall guarantee safe movement of citizens, vehicles and cargo in both directions along the Lachin Corridor.”

For more than a month now, the people of Nagorno-Karabakh remain under factual siege. Food, medical and energy supplies to Nagorno-Karabakh are almost completely halted. About 400 tons of essential goods, including grain, flour, rice, vegetables, fruits, medicines, and baby formula, were imported to Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenia daily. After around five weeks of the blockade, there is a severe shortage of all essential goods.

Moreover, the deliberate 3-day interruption of the gas supply in freezing winter conditions, followed by ongoing disruptions of the electricity grid and telecommunication lines in the entire territory of Nagorno-Karabakh are another evidence of preplanned actions of the Azerbaijani authorities. This severely impacts the daily life of the people and leads to a number of adverse humanitarian consequences, such as lack of electricity, disruption of the educational process at the schools; disruption of the work of state agencies and of the heating of vitally important institutions such as hospitals, disruption of businesses. People are deprived of heating and hot water. The authorities introduced the rationing of fuel, and now of food and essential goods.

The humanitarian crisis is worsening with each passing day and requires the immediate and targeted intervention of the international community. We cannot stand by and watch how people are slowly starving to death, because of political games and perhaps geopolitical considerations. The time to act is now.

At the request of Armenia, this issue has been discussed at the UN Security Council. We have briefed the members of the Security Council and also the Secretary-General about the dire situation and urged our partners to step in and stop the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe.

Of course, I could not but welcome the unambiguous statements and positions of our partner countries calling Azerbaijan to immediately and without preconditions lift the blockade and ensure the free and unimpeded movement through the Lachin Corridor. I believe that we should increase the pressure on Azerbaijan for it to comply with its own commitments. Azerbaijan should face consequences for its actions.

The blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh is not an isolated episode but must be seen as part of a widespread and systematic policy of Azerbaijan aimed at the ethnic cleansing of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh: through creating unbearable living conditions, Azerbaijan aims to coerce the people of Nagorno-Karabakh to leave their native land, leave their homes. The recent statement of the President of Azerbaijan suggesting the deportation of those Armenians who do not want to become citizens of Azerbaijan comes to prove their intention of ethnic cleansing.

It is imperative to send an international fact-finding mission to Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin Corridor to assess the humanitarian situation on the ground, as well as to ensure unhindered humanitarian access to Nagorno-Karabakh for relevant UN bodies.

Excellences,

Having the political will to normalize relations with Azerbaijan, the Armenian government engaged in good faith in talks with Azerbaijan in three separate tracks, namely, the opening of all transport communications in the region, delimitation and border security, and the agreement on normalization of relations or peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In the first track – the resumption of economic and transport links in the region – we have established a trilateral working group headed from our side by the Deputy Prime Minister. There have been several meetings in this format and issues of possible roads and railway connections, as well as other details related to unblocking regional communications were discussed.

Unfortunately, Azerbaijan’s approach in this process was non-constructive from the very beginning. Despite its clear commitment taken under the 9 November 2020 and 11 January 2021 trilateral statements, Azerbaijan put forward the unsubstantiated demand for the extraterritorial corridor through the sovereign territory of Armenia. I want to clearly state that Armenia never took any commitment or agreed in any manner to any extraterritorial corridor through its territory, and all the claims by the Azerbaijani side are clear distortions and manipulation of the substance of the trilateral statements.

Recently the president of Azerbaijan acknowledged that it was himself who introduced the term of so-called “Zangezur Corridor” in the international agenda and threatened to establish it sooner or later, regardless of whether Armenia wants it or not. And he said that he introduced this term after the signing of the November 9 Trilateral Statement.

I would like to once again make it clear: we rule out any extraterritorial corridor on the territory of the Republic of Armenia and will not provide any corridor to anyone. This is a principled and irrevocable position, fully in line with the relevant provision of the 9 November statement. Moreover, the decision on providing a link between the western regions of Azerbaijan and Nakhijevan can be adopted swiftly, as soon as Azerbaijan admits that all communications should operate under the jurisdiction and legislation of the Republic of Armenia.

In this context, I would like to inform that recently another attempt to find a final agreement on the opening of railway communications didn’t succeed, as the Azerbaijani side put forward new conditions that were in contradiction with the primary understanding of the sides on the modalities. In fact, this was the second time that Azerbaijan’s actions derailed the progress on this issue. The first time preliminary agreement to solve the

issues of railway connection was reached back in December 2021. This fact has even found its place in the statement of the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, from 14 December 2021.

The second track of the normalization talks is the work of the Commissions of delimitation and border security. The Commissions were created after the armed incursion of the Azerbaijani armed forces into the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia on 12 May 2021 and the subsequent occupation of Armenia's lands.

The Commissions held meetings to discuss the parameters of the delimitation of the international border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. We firmly believe that without clearly agreed parameters of the delimitation of the border, it will be impossible to achieve sustainable peace. In this regard, the agreements reached in Prague and Sochi, in particular, the reference to the Almaty protocol and subsequent documents are of utmost importance. Though, in subsequent interpretations the President of Azerbaijan, while claiming that Armenia thus recognized Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, failed to affirm the respect for the territorial integrity of Armenia.

The work of the Commissions was hampered by Azerbaijan. First, despite the agreements that the commission should have a double mandate and work on delimitation and stable security situation along, and in the vicinity of, the borderline reached in Sochi on 26 November 2021 and during the second trilateral meeting of the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan hosted by the President of the European Council it refused to include the term "border security" in the title of the Commissions, which was rather indicative of its true intentions. Then, on 13 September 2022, the armed forces of Azerbaijan launched an unprovoked and unjustified large-scale military attack in the southern and southeastern directions of the Republic of Armenia resulting in the invasion into and occupation of other swathes of the sovereign territory of Armenia. More than 200 servicemen were killed. The towns and villages in border provinces were indiscriminately shelled. During this aggression Azerbaijani armed forces committed war crimes, extrajudicial killings, subjected Armenian military personnel, including women to the most shocking and horrific humiliation and torture. These facts were documented by the Azerbaijani servicemen themselves and were uploaded to various social media outlets, clearly aiming to intimidate the Armenian side. In fact, the 44-days war of aggression was also accompanied by large-scale violations of international humanitarian law.

In this context, taking this opportunity, I would like to express our gratitude to the Polish Chairmanship, the Secretary-General, the OSCE Troika and the FSC Chairmanship for dispatching the OSCE needs assessment mission to Armenia to assess the situation on the ground, as well as all appreciation of efforts of those who supported the mission. The report of the mission clearly revealed the scale and magnitude of destruction, and we took note of the Conclusions and Recommendations contained therein, which we believe should serve as a reference point for the follow-up and further engagement of the OSCE executive structures with Armenia.

I also would like to thank the European Union for dispatching the monitoring mission to Armenia. We stand ready for further cooperation in this regard.

The September aggression, as well as previous attacks and provocations by Azerbaijan, should be considered against the broader background of ever-expanding territorial claims against Armenia, including the capital city Yerevan, constantly voiced by the President of Azerbaijan and echoed by other high-ranking political personalities, which are accompanied manifestly by threats of use of force. This tactic of coercive foreign policy is deployed by Azerbaijan to extract endless one-sided concessions.

For the moment we see no indication of change in this policy pattern, that is of Azerbaijan's willingness to abandon its territorial claims, its bellicose rhetoric and to commit to peace. Under these circumstances, we have all grounds to believe that even after the signing of an agreement on the normalization of relations with Azerbaijan, it will continue to raise these absurd territorial claims against Armenia.

The third track of talks is related to the text of the possible agreement on the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan or peace treaty, which should comprehensively address all the issues and create a conducive security environment for the continuation of discussions in various directions.

The Armenian side suggested several fundamental proposals, in particular, on clarification of parameters of delimitation of the international border, on distancing of forces from the state border and creation of a demilitarized zone, as well as the creation of the Institute of Guarantors of the peace agreement. It is regrettable that all the proposals of the Armenian side were rejected by Azerbaijan.

Along with this, we believe that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict - the issue of guarantees of rights and securities of people living in Nagorno-Karabakh - also has to be addressed. However, taking into account the Azerbaijani suggestion to discuss this issue separately

from the peace agreement, the Armenian side suggested creating an international mechanism for dialogue between Stepanakert and Baku.

We have to recognize the enormity of this task, considering that for more than 30 years there were effectively no relations between the two countries. But we firmly believe that the normalization of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations is crucial for the security and stability of the region and its perspectives. However, and this should also be recognized, this normalization could not be achieved without addressing the root causes of the conflict, the issue of fundamental human rights and the political will to work towards reconciliation.

The blockade of the Lachin Corridor, which goes exactly in the opposite direction and makes the perspective of any progress in all these tracks even more distant, proves once again the absolute necessity of international engagement to address the issues of rights and security of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Excellencies,

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains a significant challenge to regional and international peace and stability. The aggressive posturing, anti-Armenian rhetoric directed against Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, the blockade of the Lachin Corridor comes to confirm this fact.

More than two years after the signing of the Trilateral Statement on 9 November 2020, Azerbaijan still refuses to repatriate all Armenian Prisoners of War, captives, and other detained persons, in violation of obligations under the Geneva Conventions, the Trilateral Statement itself and the constant calls of the international community. Currently, according to the data confirmed by Azerbaijan, 33 people are still kept hostage in Baku. I must also highlight two dozen well-documented cases of enforced disappearances, where we are in possession of indisputable, recorded facts of the capture of Armenian Prisoners of War, yet Azerbaijan rejects their captivity.

Armenia is also extremely concerned about the state of the Armenian cultural heritage in the territories that fell under Azerbaijani control in the aftermath of the 2020 war. Dispatching of a UNESCO fact-finding mission to Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories, talks on which have been ongoing since November 2020, are still rejected by the Azerbaijani side.

We understand that nowadays the OSCE is not having the best of days and the situation in the South Caucasus is not the only crisis that the Organization is facing. At the same time, we believe that all conflicts in the area of OSCE responsibility should have the adequate attention of the organization and its structures. The OSCE with the Co-Chairs of the Minsk Group has been involved in the political resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from the very beginning. Despite all the challenges the Group still has a responsibility as the political resolution of the conflict is yet to be achieved.

We believe that OSCE can play an instrumental role not merely in achieving but also sustaining peace through the involvement of its structures.

I thank you.