



Agency on State Support to
Non-Governmental Organizations
of the Republic of Azerbaijan



Regional Human Rights and
Media Center Public Union

BASHLIBEL MASSACRE

**ARMENIA'S ETHNIC CLEANSING AND OTHER
WAR CRIMES IN THE AZERBAIJANI TERRITORIES**



2023



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BASHLIBEL MASSACRE

REPORT

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BACKGROUND

Armenia and Azerbaijan were formerly part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) under the names Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia (the Armenian SSR) and Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan (the Azerbaijan SSR). They gained independence in the wake of the collapse of the USSR, with Armenia becoming independent on September 21, 1991, and Azerbaijan on October 18, 1991. The Karabakh region, which was subject to Armenian irredentism against Azerbaijan throughout the 20th century and afterwards, was established as an autonomous oblast within the Azerbaijan SSR on July 7, 1923 – under the name Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO). However, the Armenian SSR and later the Republic of Armenia consistently sought to carve off this specific region of Azerbaijan, which had a majority population of ethnic Armenians due to the deliberate drawing of boundaries by the Soviets.

Seizing the opportunity created by the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Armenia launched a fully-fledged war against Azerbaijan in order to unify the Azerbaijan's NKAO with Armenia. The war which lasted until the ceasefire agreement in 1994 and went down in history as the First Karabakh War, ended with the occupation of almost twenty percent of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territory. The occupied territories included not only the former NKAO but also seven adjacent districts (Kalbajar, Lachin, Gubadli, Zangilan, Jabrail, Agdam and Fuzuli) of Azerbaijan.

The First Karabakh War came on the heels of the deportations of ethnic Azerbaijanis from the modern territories of Armenia. Starting from the fall of 1987, Armenian nationalists attacked and expelled Azerbaijanis from Kafan region, the capital city of Yerevan and other territories of Armenia.¹ In this first stage of the contemporary period of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, more than 200,000 Azerbaijanis were expelled from Armenia in the process of violent ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijanis from their ancestral homes. It is worth recalling that deportations of ethnic Azerbaijanis from the present-day Armenian territories happened also earlier, particularly, in the early and midtwentieth century. In 1948-1953, 150 thousand Azerbaijanis were massively deported from the territory of modern Armenia.

These deportations were accompanied by mass murders and other humanitarian tragedies as these people objected to the forced expulsion from their ancestral settlements. Their properties were plundered and looted, the cultural heritage was ruined,

¹Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, New-York, 2003, 18.

the religious monuments and mosques with historical significance were desecrated, the cemeteries of ethnic Azerbaijanis were demolished, graves were destroyed and desecrated. Thus, the leaders of the post-Soviet Armenia built the present-day statehood of their country through the ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijanis from its territories and proudly declared that Tseghakron (Armenian racism), a fascist doctrine of Nazis Garegin Nzdeh, constituted the ideological basis of their statehood.²

Similarly, in the course of the First Karabakh War, Armenia committed ethnic cleansing against Azerbaijanis in the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and surrounding territories of Azerbaijan that were occupied by Armenia in the early 1990s. More than 700 thousand of Azerbaijanis were victims of this ethnic cleansing and forcefully expelled from their homes. In one of the most tragic massacres, on 25-26 February 1992 in the Khojaly town, 613 civilians, including 106 women and 63 children were killed, and 1,275 people were taken hostage. The massacre of civilians took place during the occupation of all other districts of Azerbaijan in 1992-1993. In the village of Bashlibel of the Kalbajar district, which is the primary focus of this report, **27 civilians (including 13 women and one child)** were killed in a direct and targeted attack on a cave in the mountains where the villagers were hiding after having fled their homes.³

In 1993, the United Nations Security Council adopted four resolutions (Resolutions 822, 853, 874 and 884) concerning Armenia's aggression against Azerbaijan. These resolutions condemned the use of force against Azerbaijan and the occupation of its territories. They also reaffirmed the importance of respecting Azerbaijan's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and international borders, emphasizing that the occupation of territories through force is unacceptable. Additionally, the resolutions acknowledged that the Karabakh region is an integral part of Azerbaijan and called for the immediate, complete, and unconditional withdrawal of the occupying forces from all the territories they have occupied.

Thus, the resolutions were in line with the international legal doctrine of *uti possidetis juris* that was referred after the collapse of the Soviet Union in order to secure the legitimacy of the boundaries of newly independent States. Under this legal doctrine, the former administrative borders of Azerbaijan SSR, which had included Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, were recognized by international law as the legitimate borders of the newly independent Republic of Azerbaijan. The military hostilities persisted, however, after the adoption of these resolutions and a ceasefire agreement was only reached in May 1994, through the mediation of Russia, in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

In the course of this war against Azerbaijan, Armenia flagrantly violated the international law and norms including international humanitarian law. Armenia's aggression caused the forced displacement of a significant civilian population in Azerbaijan, as well as assaults on civilians and the shelling of its land. According to a report circulated as document of the UN General Assembly in 2009, the Armenian

² Hetq.am, 2003: "Our ideology is based on the Tseghakron doctrine of Nzdeh - Interview with Prime Minister Andranik Margaryan", available at: <https://hetq.am/en/article/6953> (Accessed: 30 July 2023).

³ Kazimov, K. 2013: *Bashlibel Tragedy: Armenian Atrocities through the Eyes of Witnesses*, QHT Publishing House, Baku, pp. 107, 114–115, 133–134.

aggression made approximately one out of every eight persons in Azerbaijan an internally displaced person or refugee, 20,000 Azerbaijani people were killed, 50,000 people were wounded or became invalids, about 5,000 citizens of Azerbaijan were still missing at the time of writing.⁴ It was particularly emphasized that the Azerbaijani refugees and internally displaced persons were forced to flee because Armenia and its military forces had the clear aim of ethnic cleansing and of creating a mono-ethnic culture there. In 2010, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) recognized the offences of the Armenian military forces against Azerbaijani civilians as acts of particular gravity that amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity.⁵

For long years, Azerbaijan sought to resolve this conflict with Armenia through diplomatic means and peaceful efforts. In the aftermath of the 1994 ceasefire agreement, the sides began negotiations on a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The negotiations were entrusted to the mediation of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) – which was later renamed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The Minsk Group of the OSCE, an international mission including eleven states and co-chaired by the United States, Russia, and France, coordinated the conflict resolution process until the breakout of the Second Karabakh War (a.k.a. 44-Day War) on September 27, 2020.

The international efforts to reach a resolution failed to deliver a breakthrough owing to the refusal of the Armenian government to return the occupied territories. Being interested in the prolongation of the status quo and consolidation of control over the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, the Armenian leaders refused to implement the settlement formulas proposed by the Minsk Group. This aggravated the situation on the frontline, sporadically causing violent escalations (e.g., in April 2016).

The change of government in mid-2018 in Armenia initially generated hope for an eventual breakthrough. This was caused not only by signals from the highest level of the Armenian government, but also by the relatively peaceful environment on the front line in 2019. Unfortunately, it was soon clear that Armenia's new government, headed by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, was abusing this process to consolidate its domestic control, as it soon revitalized extremist approaches relating to Armenia's claim to the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. This policy approach, bolstered by the belligerent rhetoric of Armenia's military top brass, destroyed any possibility for a negotiated resolution.

Addressing a meeting of the Armenian diaspora in New York in March 2019, Armenia's Defense Minister, Davit Tonoyan, declared that Yerevan would use the formula "new war for new territories" instead of the formula "peace in exchange for territories" proposed by the mediators. According to him, this strategy "will rid Armenia of this trench condition, the constant defensive state, and will add the units which may

⁴Report on the armed aggression of the Republic of Armenia against the Republic of Azerbaijan: root causes and consequences (06 October 2009), available under the following link: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/670991?ln=en>

⁵ Fatullayev v Azerbaijan, App. No. 40984/07, ECtHR, 22 April 2010.

shift the military actions to the territory of the enemy.”⁶ Tonoyan made this statement immediately after the OSCE-mediated meeting of the Prime Minister of Armenia with the President of Azerbaijan in Vienna, which resulted in a Joint Statement on the need to create a favorable environment for peace and the adoption of results-oriented steps in the negotiation process to find a peaceful settlement to the conflict.

An extremist position was also taken by the Armenian Prime Minister himself who, in August 2019, in his address at the opening ceremony of the Pan-Armenian games that were held illegally in Khankandi, part of the then Armenian-occupied internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan, called for unification between Armenia and Karabakh, declaring “Karabakh is Armenia, period.”⁷ Breaking with the tradition of former Armenian governments that had previously denied Yerevan’s control over the occupying regime established in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, he put the essence of the entire peace effort into question. Even Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov of Russia, Armenia’s ally within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), reacted to Pashinyan’s speech and highlighted that such statements “do not help the settlement of the conflict.”⁸

This ultra-nationalist and populist approach of the Armenian government nullified all the internationally-mediated peace efforts and led the process toward a new war on 27 September 2020, which lasted 44 days until November 10 of that year. This war went down in history as the Second Karabakh War, put an end to the occupation of the Azerbaijani territories and opened up new opportunities for peace and security in the South Caucasus. The trilateral (Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) statement that ended the war on November 10, 2020 included clauses not only about the settlement of the territorial disputes but also drew the picture of the region’s future. This was, therefore, more than a ceasefire agreement and created a potential for Armenia and Azerbaijan to sign a peace treaty in the future. The restoration of all communication and peaceful co-existence provided a unique opportunity for the two conflicting parties.

⁶ “We Do the Opposite – New War for New Territories”, Iragir.am, <https://www.iragir.am/en/2019/03/30/71511> (Access date: 23 November 2020).

⁷ Joshua Kucera, “Pashinyan calls for unification between Armenia and Karabakh”, Eurasianet, <https://eurasianet.org/pashinyan-calls-for-unification-between-armenia-and-karabakh>, (Access date: 23 November 2020).

⁸ Abdul Kerimkhanov, “What did 2019 mean in terms of Karabakh conflict?”, Azernews, <https://www.azernews.az/karabakh/160259.html> (Access date: 23 November 2020).

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Armenia’s occupation of the Azerbaijani territories, including the Bashlibel village of the Kalbajar district, and the forced displacement it carried out against the Azerbaijani residents of the occupied territories were violations of a series of international conventions, resolutions, norms and documents. This section will list some of the principles of the international law that are applicable in this context and related to the massacre of civilians, the taking of hostages, ethnic cleansing, the destruction of the cultural heritage, civilian infrastructure and settlements, the pillage and plundering of the public and private property, as well as damage to the natural environment, flora and fauna of the region.

Above all, it is important to note that the Republic of Armenia has been recognized in a number of international judicial assessments as the responsible actor for the occupation of the Azerbaijani territories as well as for the war crimes committed by the Armed Forces of Armenia and the illegal separatist forces in these territories. This happened so despite the fact that the governments of the Republic of Armenia consistently denied any role they played in the First Karabakh War and the subsequent occupational period in the Azerbaijani territories. They sought to present the separatist regime they installed in the occupied Karabakh region, so-called “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic” (“NKR”) as the sole responsible actor. This attempt by the Armenian governments failed and rejected by the international courts.

For example, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) made it clear that Armenia bears responsibility not only for the acts of its own agents and officials but also on the basis of “effective overall control” for the acts of a “local administration” which survives by virtue of its support.⁹ The conclusion by the ECHR in the *Chiragov and Others v Armenia* (2015) case emphasized that:

“It is hardly conceivable that Nagorno-Karabakh – an entity with a population of less than 150,000 ethnic Armenians – was able, without the substantial military support of Armenia, to set up a defence force in early 1992 that, against the country of Azerbaijan with a population of approximately seven million people, not only established control of the

⁹Chiragov and Others v Armenia, App. No. 13216/05, ECtHR (Grand Chamber), 16 June 2015.

former NKAO but also, before the end of 1993, conquered the whole or major parts of seven surrounding Azerbaijani districts.”

Therefore, the occupation of Azerbaijani territories from 1992 to 2020 was recognized as the responsibility of the Republic of Armenia. Armenia bears accountability also for the murder of civilians during this occupation, which constitutes a violation of international humanitarian law. At the core of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 lies the principle that individuals who are not actively involved in armed conflict should be treated humanely. The 1945 Charter of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg as well as the Geneva Conventions prohibit “violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds” of civilians and persons *hors de combat*. According to the Geneva Conventions, “violence to the life, health, or physical or mental well-being of persons”, and in particular “murder”, are “prohibited at any time and in any place whatsoever”. The Rome Statute identifies “Intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population as such or against individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities” as a war crime—a provision that reflects a rule of customary international law which establishes individual criminal responsibility for such conduct.

International law stipulates a clear framework for the actions of the occupant in the territory which is under its control. According to Article 43 of the Hague Regulations, “The authority of the legitimate power having in fact passed into the hands of the occupant, the latter shall take all the measures in his power to restore and ensure, as far as possible, public order and safety, while respecting, unless absolutely prevented, the laws in force in the country.” Hence, the Regulations obligate the occupant to maintain public order in the occupied territory and “to protect the inhabitants of the occupied territory against acts of violence, and not to tolerate such violence by any third state”.

Armenia did not respect any of these regulations and principles that prohibit attacks directed at civilians, on the murder and willful killing of civilians. This was confirmed by the 2015 resolution of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) which stated that in the course of this conflict “ethnic Armenians conquered several Azeri villages, leading to at least several hundred deaths and the departure of the population”.¹⁰

The phrase “the departure of the population” does not, however, reflect the picture with entirety. The forced displacement of the Azerbaijani people from the occupied territories by the Armed Forces of Armenia was an act of “ethnic cleansing”—which is defined by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as being “in practice used, by reference to a specific region or area, to mean ‘rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using

¹⁰Chiragov and Others v Armenia, App. No. 13216/05, ECtHR (Grand Chamber), 16 June 2015, para. 18

force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups from the area”¹¹. Likewise, Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention states that “Individual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportations of protected persons from occupied territory to the territory of the Occupying Power or to that of any other country, occupied or not, are prohibited, regardless of their motive.”

Due to ethnic cleansing policies of Armenia in violation of these principles, more than 1 million Azerbaijanis were forcibly displaced from their homes in Armenia and in the occupied Azerbaijani territories. Many international organizations condemned Armenia’s actions – unfortunately, without immediate impact on the ground. The aforementioned resolutions of the UNSC (1993) expressed “grave concern at the displacement of large numbers of civilians in the Azerbaijani Republic”.

Needless to say, international law unequivocally prohibits the taking hostages by the occupying power – another principle which was not heeded by the Armenian government. “The taking of hostages is prohibited”, clearly states Article 34 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Hostage-taking is similarly prohibited “at any time and in any place whatsoever, whether committed by civilian or by military agents” by virtue of Article 75 of Additional Protocol. One of the most shocking incidents of the taking hostages by Armenia during the Karabakh war occurred during the ruthless attack on Khojaly in February 1992, where 773 individuals were taken as hostages, with Human Rights Watch reporting that the majority of them were civilians.¹²

The magnitude of the hostage-taking carried out by Armenian forces should not be underestimated. According to the official reports of Azerbaijan, 3,888 citizens of Azerbaijan were registered as missing as a result of the conflict in the early 1990s, including 3,170 servicemen and 718 civilians. Among the civilians, 71 are children, 266 are women and 326 are elderly persons. It has been established that 871 of the 3,888 missing persons were either taken as prisoners of war or hostages, including 604 servicemen and 267 civilians, of whom 29 are children, 98 are women and 112 are elderly persons. In addition, 1098 Azerbaijani civilians, including 224 children, 354 women and 225 elderly persons, were taken hostage by Armenian forces but already released.¹³ Unfortunately, the international organizations, including the International Committee of

¹¹ Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Bosnia and Herzegovina v Serbia and Montenegro) (Judgment) [2007] ICJ Rep 43, p. 122.

¹² Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, “Bloodshed in the Caucasus: Escalation of the Armed Conflict in Nagorno Karabakh” (September 1992).

¹³ State Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Prisoners of War, Hostages and Missing Persons, “Prisoners of War, Hostages and Missing Persons”, Available under the following link: <https://web.archive.org/web/20190717070025/http://www.human.gov.az/en/view-page/27/%C6%8FS%C4%B0R,%20G%C4%B0ROV%20V%C6%8F%20%C4%B0TK%C4%B0N%20%C3%9C%C5%9EM%C3%9C%C5%9EL%C6%8FR#.XS7HkHbP1PY>

Red Cross (ICRC), failed to follow what happened to those hostages that were never released and did not pressure the Armenian government to release them.

The victim of the Armenian aggression was also the cultural heritage, private and public property in the occupied territories, environment, flora and fauna of the region. International law contains provisions not only about the non-combatant population of the occupied territory but also its civilian infrastructure and environment. Civilian property is protected in armed conflict, just like civilians themselves. Under international law, attacks can only be directed against military objectives. Civilian objects, such as homes, schools, and hospitals, must not be targeted.

According to the Hague Regulations, “Civilian objects shall not be the object of attack or of reprisals”. Even these Regulations stipulate that “In case of doubt whether an object which is normally dedicated to civilian purposes, such as a place of worship, a house or other dwelling or a school, is being used to make an effective contribution to military action, it shall be presumed not to be so used.”

International law is clear also in its prohibitions against pillage (or plunder or spoliation). For example, Articles 28 and 47 of the Hague Regulations outlaw pillage in all circumstances. The second paragraph of Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention states with clarity: “Pillage is prohibited.” The Rome Statute states that “pillaging a town or place, even when taken by assault” constitutes a war crime in international armed conflicts. According to customary international law, it is essential to protect private property in occupied areas. Confiscation of private property is generally prohibited, unless there is a compelling military need that necessitates the destruction or seizure of such property.

Likewise, the destruction of cultural heritage including religious institutions is forbidden under international law. Article 56 of the Hague Regulations, 1907, states that: “The property of municipalities, that of institutions dedicated to religion, charity and education, the arts and sciences, even when State property, shall be treated as private property. All seizure of, destruction or willful damage done to institutions of this character, historic monuments, works of art and science, is forbidden, and should be made the subject of legal proceedings.”

As early as September 1992, Human Rights Watch documented that Armenian forces were involved in the “shelling” of Azerbaijani villages in December 1991. According to the report, residents who had left their towns witnessed houses engulfed in flames from a vantage point about a kilometer away. The report also included accounts from eyewitnesses who had seen Armenian forces “enter the houses, and when they went out, the houses burned”, and also cars hauling things away from the houses, including carpets”.¹⁴ In another report, Human Rights Watch confirmed that “Wide-scale looting

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, “Bloodshed in the Caucasus: Escalation of the Armed Conflict in Nagorno Karabakh” (September 1992).

and destruction of civilian property” by Armenian forces continued throughout the Armenian offensives of 1993, often orchestrated in advance by separatist forces in Karabakh and “supported by forces from the Republic of Armenia”.¹⁵

To provide an understanding of the magnitude of the destruction, according to official reports of the Azerbaijani government, more than 900 settlements and 6,000 industrial, agricultural and other enterprises were looted, plundered and destroyed as had 150,000 homes. More than 4,300 social and cultural facilities were destroyed, including 693 secondary schools, 855 pre-schools, 695 medical institutions, 927 libraries, 473 historical monuments, palaces and museums, and six State theatres and concert halls. Armenian forces pillaged 6,000 Azerbaijani factories, destroyed 1,200 km of irrigation systems, driven 244,000 sheep and 69,000 cattle from Azerbaijani land into Armenia, and destroyed 160 bridges, 2670 km of road and 2000 km of gas distribution lines.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, “Azerbaijan: Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh” (December 1994), pp. xii, 12.

OCCUPATION OF THE KALBAJAR DISTRICT

In spring of 1993, Armed Forces of Armenia, having occupied the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and Lachin district, launched a full-scale attack against the Kalbajar district. The occupation of Lachin was a major turning point in Armenia's war against Azerbaijan as this region hosted the only passage between the NKAO and Armenia – called in those years as “Lachin corridor”. The occupation of this passage opened the door for free supplies of military equipment and troops to the separatist forces in the NKAO. Outside of the former NKAO and after Lachin, the Kalbajar district was the first target of the occupation forces.

Kalbajar's population, up to 55 thousand people prior to the occupation, started to feel the hostility of the Armenian side in late 1990, when the Soviet Union was still standing although was about to fall apart. In November 1990, the separatist forces of the NKAO severed the electricity supply to Kalbajar which was provided at that time from the Agdam district via the territory of the NKAO. Although the electricity supply was recovered in February 1992 after the successful counteroffensive of the Azerbaijani army in Agdara region, it was possible to provide electricity only to the district center of Kalbajar while all 128 villages of the region remained in darkness. The region, including the district center¹⁶, was in darkness when Armenians launched military operations against Kalbajar on 27 March 1993.

The Armenian attacks against Kalbajar had started a year before the launch of full-scale military operations. In the night of the 6th of April in 1992, Armenian armed forces attacked the Agdaban village of Kalbajar district which was located close to the former NKAO and hosted 130 houses and 779 peaceful residents. According to official data, during this attack, 32 people were killed with specialty cruelty, eight people aged 90-100, two children and seven women were burnt alive, two people went missing, 12 people were seriously injured, and five people were taken hostage.¹⁷

A year later, Armed Forces of Armenia launched military operations on the Kalbajar district that lasted from 27 March until 5 April 1993. These operations against Kalbajar were described by Human Rights Watch, an international non-governmental organization headquartered in New York City and conducting research and advocacy on human rights, as involving multiple violations of the rules of war. According to a report produced by

¹⁶The electricity supply to district center was again cut off by Armenians in February 1993.

¹⁷“UN circulates document on Aghdaban massacre committed by Armenia”, Azernews 24 April 2020, available under the following link: <https://www.azernews.az/karabakh/164400.html> (Accessed 4 August 2023).

Human Rights Watch in 1994, these violations included “forced displacement of the civilian population, indiscriminate fire, and the taking of hostages”.¹⁸ The report provides information about the background of the occupation and how the occupation of the “Lachin corridor” was instrumental in the blockade and eventual occupation of Kalbajar:

“At the time of the offensive, mountainous Kalbajar province was largely cut off from the rest of Azerbaijan. Armenia lay to the west, the Lachin corridor (captured by Karabakh Armenian forces in June 1992) to the south, Aghdara (Mardakert) province (with its vital Terter-Kalbajar road in Karabakh Armenian hands) to the east, and to the north, the Murov mountains reaching heights of over 10,000 feet towered over the province. Because of prior Karabakh Armenian land conquests, the only outlet from Kalbajar to Azerbaijan proper was over the Murov mountains to the north through the Omar pass, a treacherous journey in winter.”

Human Rights Watch reported that “civilians had little or no advance warning of the actual attack and even less time to make their escape after the limited routes still available were closed by advancing Karabakh Armenian forces”:

“The swift and short nature of the Kalbajar offensive, the mountainous terrain with few good roads over which it was fought, and the late winter timing of the attack left the civilian population extremely vulnerable; many were taken hostage or killed by indiscriminate fire”.

It is reported that Armenians subjected the region to intense shelling, artillery fire, and bombardment, with some of it carried out by Grad rockets, over several days. Even as civilians attempted to flee their villages, they were fired upon. In particular, “While Karabakh Armenian forces initially allowed the majority of Kalbajar province’s civilian population to flee, after a time it seems most escape routes, except those over the treacherous Murov mountains, were closed”, according to Human Rights Watch. Those who attempted to escape over the Murov mountains were specifically targeted and injured or killed by Armenian forces. Human Rights Watch reported that thousands of people trekked over the Murov mountains to escape the offensive by Karabakh Armenian forces. Unfortunately, during the mountain crossing, around 200 Azerbaijanis lost their lives, primarily due to exposure. The situation was so severe that even helicopter flights to evacuate civilians had to be halted due to shelling around the helicopter pad. “In the space of a week, 60,000 people were forced to flee their homes. Today all are displaced, and Kalbajar stands empty and looted”, Human Rights Watch reported in 1994. “Looting and

¹⁸Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, “Azerbaijan: Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh” (December 1994). Available under the following link: <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/AZER%20Conflict%20in%20N-K%20Dec94.pdf> (Accessed: 1 August 2023).

destruction of civilian property are also prohibited but occurred frequently during the offensive” against Kalbajar, stated the organization’s report.

The attacks against the civilians were conducted in the most ruthless manner without any empathy and mercy. These crimes in defiant violation of international law were documented by Human Rights Watch. Its 1994 report enumerates a number of cases of such attacks by the Armenian forces against unarmed civilians in Kalbajar. For instance:

“In a separate incident, on the morning of April 1, Karabakh Armenian forces armed with automatic rifles and rocket-propelled grenades indiscriminately attacked a Gaz-52 truck carrying approximately twenty-five Azerbaijani civilians (and no soldiers) as it neared the tunnel between the villages of Zulfugarli and Jomerd. According to a seventeen-year-old Azeri from Kelsali village, all the passengers but one were shot or hit by shrapnel and then taken hostage.”

“Civilians fleeing over the Murov mountains were targeted by Karabakh Armenian forces. On March 31, the men from Galanboyu village referred to above decided to flee over the mountain through which the Zulfugarli tunnel runs and then head north towards the Murov mountains. Karabakh Armenians shot at them.”

On April 30, 1993, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 822 – its first resolution related with the Armenian aggression against Azerbaijan – which specifically addressed the alarming situation in the Kalbajar district and conveyed serious apprehension about the mass displacement of civilians and the ensuing humanitarian crisis in the region. The resolution urgently called for unrestricted access to international humanitarian relief efforts in all areas affected by the conflict, aiming to alleviate the suffering of the civilian population. It also emphasized the obligation of all parties involved to adhere to the principles and regulations of international humanitarian law. This resolution of the world body had no effect on the situation in the region and the tragedy of thousands of people expelled from their homeland.

In the course of this aggression against Azerbaijan, France took a pro-Armenian position at the UN Security Council discussions about the war and sought to exculpate Armenia for its invasion despite it carrying out ethnic cleansing against Azerbaijanis at the time those discussions were held. According to recently declassified State Department cables concerning the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, France’s UN Ambassador watered down the language of the UN Security Council resolution proposed by the USA and other

members of the Council and succeeded to minimize its consequences for Armenia.¹⁹ At the insistence of France, the perpetrators of the invasion were mentioned as “local Armenian forces” (i.e., not Armenia as a State) and the conflict was treated not under the Chapter VII of the UN Charter as an “act of aggression,” but under the weaker Chapter VI as a dispute that should be settled peacefully.



Photo 1. Kalbajar’s population fleeing the region through the mountains (1993)

This happened despite all the necessary evidence which showed that the Republic of Armenia was the major force behind the occupation of Kalbajar. For example, British journalist Thomas de Wall in his book “*Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through peace and war*” (2003) notes during the occupation of Kalbajar “For the first time, strong evidence was produced that troops from the Republic of Armenia had fought inside Azerbaijan and outside Karabakh”.²⁰ He states that the bulk of the invading forces that invaded Kalbajar, carried out ethnic cleansing and slaughtered the civilians came from the territories of the Republic of Armenia:

¹⁹ Declassified Document Concerning the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, available under the following link: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/100499> (Accessed: 4 August 2023).

²⁰ De Waal, Thomas. *Black garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through peace and war*. NYU press, 2013., p. 212.

“The main thrust of the Armenian attack came from the west, from the Vardenis region of Armenia—although this was denied at the time for political reasons. A supporting offensive came from Karabakh.”²¹

The presence of the troops of the Republic of Armenia in Kalbajar was confirmed by international organizations as well. For instance, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) expressed “extreme concern” in its report about the presidential elections that took place in Armenia on 16 and 30 March 1998.²² According to the report, one of the mobile ballot boxes crossed the national border of the Republic of Armenia to collect votes from Armenian soldiers posted to the Kalbajar region of Azerbaijan. This incident highlighted the fact that Armenian troops were stationed in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, as confirmed by international observers and officially reported by OSCE.

According to the official statistics, up to 60,000 people lived in Kalbajar at that time of the occupation which resulted in the forced displacement of all these people with, 511 civilians killed and 321 people taken hostage and disappeared.²³ The Azerbaijani government, in collaboration with the UNHCR and ICRC, established facilities to accommodate the people forcefully expelled from the Kalbajar region by the Armed Forces of Armenia. Within a week of the Kalbajar province’s capture, on April 7, 1993, the Azeri State Committee on Refugees recorded the registration of 9,582 families from Kalbajar. Those displaced as a result of the Kalbajar offensive were accommodated in various locations, including schools, summer camps, hotels, and tents. Having forcefully expelled all the Azerbaijanis from Kalbajar, Armenia started to settle Armenians in the region in later years. In its report, the OSCE fact-finding mission (“FFM”) in 2005 found out that Armenia had settled approximately 1,500 people in Kalbajar after the occupation.²⁴

The occupation of Kalbajar paved the way for relentless plundering of the district and destruction of its infrastructure and cultural heritage as it happened in all other occupied territories of Azerbaijan. In 2005, the International Crisis Group reported that “Before the war the 424,900 inhabitants of those districts were almost exclusively Azeris, none of whom remain... Even electrical wiring, pipes, and other infrastructure have been sold as scrap”.²⁵

²¹Ibid. p. 213.

²² Final report issued on 9 April 1998, p. 8.

²³ No: 098/19, statement of the Press Service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the occupation of the Kalbajar region of Azerbaijan and the anniversary of the April 2016 battles, available under the following link: <https://mfa.gov.az/az/news/no09819-xin-in-metbuat-xidmetinin-azerbaycanin-kelbecer-rayonunun-igali-ve-2016-ci-ilin-aprel-doyuslerinin-ildonumu-ile-elaqedar-beyanati> (Accessed: 1 August 2023).

²⁴ Report of the OSCE fact-finding mission to the occupied territories of Azerbaijan surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, 28 February 2005, United Nations document A/59/747-S/2005/187, p. 35.

²⁵ International Crisis Group Report of 14 September 2005, op. cit., p. 7.

The historical heritage of Kalbajar suffered severe damage due to the Armenian occupation. Numerous ancient structures and cultural treasures were devastated, including the original architectural elements of the monasteries, which were once part of Azerbaijan's ancient Albanian Christian heritage, but were later altered and Armenianized.



Photo 2. The Museum of History in Kalbajar – before the occupation



Photo 3. The Museum of History in Kalbajar – after the occupation

In November 2000, the State Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Prisoners of War, Hostages, and Missing Persons reported the destruction of 4,366 “social and cultural facilities,” which included libraries, museums, theaters, and concert halls.²⁶ Subsequently, Azerbaijan issued another report, highlighting the significant and irreparable losses suffered by its cultural heritage due to Armenian aggression. The report revealed that Armenian armed forces removed numerous historical, cultural, and religious monuments, as well as works of art, from the occupied Azerbaijani territories. Many of these items were sold in auctions and shops worldwide, resulting in a distortion of their original Azerbaijani identity and heritage. Among the plundered and destroyed sites were the Museum of History in the Kalbajar region, renowned for its collection of ancient coins, gold and silver artifacts, rare stones, carpets, and other handicrafts. The entire collection of the Museum was plundered by Armenians after the occupation.

²⁶ State Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Prisoners of War, Hostages and Missing Persons, “Information on human rights violations with respect to prisoners of war and hostages kept in Armenia and the Nagorny Karabakh region of Azerbaijan”, Annex to the Letter dated 2 November 2000 from the Permanent Representative of Azerbaijan to the United Nations Office at Geneva addressed to the Secretariat of the Commission on Human Rights, UN Doc E/CN.4/2001/107 (22 November 2000), p. 2.

BASHLIBEL MASSACRE

Bashlibel was one of the biggest villages of Kalbajar. Spanning 7659 hectares, this village was nestled on the slopes of the Dalidag mountain, at the confluence of the rivers Bashlibel and Baritli. The village, before its occupation by the Armed Forces of Armenia in April 1993, was entirely inhabited by Azerbaijanis. The first documented fact about the history of the village dates back to the late 17th century. The engraved scripts on a grave, written in Arabic alphabet, indicated that the individual buried there had passed away in the year 1660. However, the village is believed to have been inhabited long before that time. In the course of the construction works in the village, some ancient graves dating back to approximately the 4th to 6th century were unexpectedly unearthed at depths of around 3 to 4 meters. Remarkably, some of these graves contained human skeletons resting inside special clay-made vessels. Additionally, an array of jewelry and ancient metal coins were discovered among the grave belongings. These historical findings were collected and sent to the Ethnography Museum of Kalbajar for preservation and further study. Regrettably, a significant portion of these precious artifacts met a tragic fate during the occupation of Kalbajar, since the Museum was demolished by the invading forces.

Before the occupation in 1993, Bashlibel was inhabited by a population of 1,790 people. The village boasted an infrastructure that comprised 323 houses, along with essential institutions like a school with a capacity for 380 pupils, a kindergarten accommodating 45 children, and a hospital with 45 beds to provide medical care. Furthermore, the village offered various amenities and services to cater to the needs of its residents. Among these were 6 shops, a public bath, a bakery facility, a club, a culture house, and two operational libraries.

In November 1990, like other parts of Kalbajar, the village of Bashlibel experienced the initial hostilities from their Armenian neighbors. During this time, Armenian separatist forces in the then Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) deliberately cut off the electricity cables passing through the territory of the former oblast, which had been supplying electricity from Agdam to Kalbajar. This action resulted in severe hardships for the villagers, as electricity was their sole source of heating, lighting, and other essential services. Unfortunately, the villages of Kalbajar, including Bashlibel, did not have access to a natural gas supply, and the roads were in poor condition, making it challenging to transport wood and other materials as substitutes for the lack of electricity. As a consequence,

the residents had to endure difficult living conditions for many years. They, however, resisted all these pressure by the Armenian side and refused to leave their homeland



Map 1. Bashlibel village

Having realized that the only way to expel the region’s local residents and carry out ethnic cleansing is the use of force, the Armed Forces of Armenia launched a full-scale military operation against Kalbajar on 27 March 1993. The residents of the Bashlibel village, in a similar way to those of many other villages, had no chance of being evacuated by the helicopters that the Azerbaijani government sent to Kalbajar to rescue the people. “On noon on April 1, the last helicopter flight left Kalbajar, and no more evacuation attempts were made because of the increased shelling around the helicopter pad”, Human Rights Watch reported in 1994.²⁷ The Bashlibel residents had to flee their village either by automobiles which were of extremely limited number or on horse, but mostly on foot. These people, like thousands of other Kalbajar residents, had to flee through the freezing Murov mountains to save their lives. The report by Human Rights Watch described the cruelty of this journey and the inhumane attacks against the fleeing civilians:

²⁷ Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, “Azerbaijan: Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh” (December 1994). Available under the following link: <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/AZER%20Conflict%20in%20N-K%20Dec94.pdf> (Accessed: 1 August 2023).

“Another wave of scared, cold, and exhausted displaced persons made its way north over the Murov mountains after the fall of the city of Kalbajar. In all, thousands trekked over the Murov mountains to escape the Karabakh Armenian offensive. One report estimated that 200 Azeris died, mostly from exposure, during the mountain crossing. Some fleeing Azeris tried to hide in the mountains or simply got lost and were taken hostage.”²⁸

Despite the very real threat of being killed or taken hostage, not everyone agreed to flee Bashlibel before the Armenian forces entered the village at around 3-4 pm on 3 April 1993. 62 people, including 9 local military servicemen, chose to remain in their homeland and sought refuge in the surrounding mountains. They possessed two shotguns and a few automatic weapons. These people believed that the Azerbaijani army would repel the Armenian forces’ offensive and eventually put an end to the occupation. Thus, they stayed hidden in the mountains, closely observing how the Armenian forces were devastating and looting their village.

According to Mahir Jafarov, who was one of the villagers hiding in the mountains, “On April 8, the Armenians returned to the village for the second time and didn’t leave anymore. From that day onwards, they began looting the houses in the village”.²⁹ “Complete plundering of the village and transportation of cattle lasted nearly a month. The plundered houses were set fire”, the witnesses said.³⁰

During this time, the villagers who were hiding occasionally returned to the village to gather food and other necessities, only to witness the destruction of their homes and the plundering of valuable items. Over the following month, their livestock and cattle were looted, and many of the village’s administrative buildings and the school building were set on fire. Tragically, a few people who were caught by the Armenian forces in the village were immediately killed. One of them, Ganaet Aghamirov, who suffered from mental illness, was brutally tortured before being killed. The other victim, Huseyn Huseynov, aged 76, was burned alive. Mahir Jafarov witnessed this tragedy:

“We were hesitating to visit the village center as a group of Armenians were still in the village. In early June, Ismat Azizov, Salim Mehdiyev (originating from the Lachin region), and I decided to come down to the village taking advantage of heavy rainfall. Then we discovered a person’s body burnt inside the collective farm administration building. Judging

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Kazimov, K. 2013: *Bashlibel Tragedy: Armenian Atrocities through the Eyes of Witnesses*, QHT Publishing House, Baku, p. 132.

³⁰Ibid.

from his cap and belongings, we identified him as Huseyn Huseynov. Disturbingly, benches had been placed around the burnt body, indicating that the perpetrators callously watched him while he suffered. This inhumane treatment of an elderly person with disabilities who had been taken hostage is a horrifying atrocity.”³¹

Another victim, Pari Salahova, aged 102 at that time, were also in the village when Armenians stormed into the area. Mahir Jafarov was one of the persons who saw her last time:

“Despite our persistent efforts, Pari arvad refused to seek shelter with us in the Gayabashi grotto. Every day, until April 16, we brought food and water for her. After April 16, the number of Armenians coming to the village increased significantly. Unfortunately, we lost all contact with Pari arvad after that date. It wasn’t until early June, during heavy rain, that we dared to come down into the village. The stench was so overpowering that it made breathing difficult. To endure the smell, we held garlic to our noses as we moved around the village. Our main purpose was to visit Pari arvad’s house and gather any information about her fate. However, the odor was so dreadful that we couldn’t even enter her house. Peering through the window, we saw that her bed was overturned in the middle of the room. It was evident that she had been killed. Tragically, we were unable to give Pari arvad a proper burial.”³²

The consequences of the invasion for the Bashlibelis were tragic. The Armenian Armed Forces were responsible for the killing of 27 persons during the invasion. Among the victims, one person was from Takhtabashi village, another from Khallanli village, and two from the regions of Lachin and Zerdab. Two of the victims were over 100 years old, highlighting the brutality of the atrocities committed. Thirteen of the killed were women, and one was a child. Additionally, 19 villagers were taken hostage in the area of the Bashlibel village and other parts of Kalbajar. 19 other villagers, along with 11 individuals from other villages who had sought refuge in Bashlibel, lived through a prolonged siege lasting 113 days. Four people lost their health and became disabled. Furthermore, two villagers remain missing, with no information about their whereabouts up to the present time.³³

During the visit of Azerbaijani law enforcement agencies to Bashlibel, following its liberation from occupation, it was discovered that several historical and cultural monuments

³¹Ibid. pp. 160-161.

³²Ibid. pp. 166-167

³³The data in this paragraph is derived from the book titled Bashlibel Tragedy: Armenian Atrocities through the Eyes of Witnesses (Baku, 2013)

of significant value had been destroyed. This includes a mosque that dates back to the XVII-XVIII centuries, which holds great historical importance. Additionally, three cemeteries in the village were subjected to destruction by Armenian armed units. The graves were desecrated, with valuable metals being stolen from the remains of the deceased.

In correspondence numbered 5-55/2-346/2023, dated August 18, 2023, from the Kalbajar District Executive Office, it has been elucidated that during the initial occupation of Bashlibel village in Kalbajar District in early 1993, the village accommodated 253 families comprising a total of 1,762 people. Based on estimations, the inhabitants of the village endured a cumulative loss amounting to 36,558,000 (thirty-six million, five hundred and fifty-eight thousand) manats because of the invasion. Presently, the number of the people registered in the Bashlibel village accounts for 557 families encompassing 2,106 residents, many of whom are temporarily residing in 27 different cities and districts across Azerbaijan.



Photo 4. Demolished and desecrated graves in Bashlibel



Photo 5. Demolished and desecrated graves in Bashlibel



Photos 6. The remnants of the demolished mosque in Bashlibel (2023)



Photo 7. Plundered and demolished houses in Bashlibel (2023)

On April 18, Armenian Forces located the shelters where 62 Bashlibel residents were hiding.

Only 30 people out of 62 who didn't leave Bashlibel and took shelters in the mountains survived the invasion. One of them, Alasgar Kazimov, born in 1890, never left the shelter in Bashlibel, saying goodbye to the others and telling them he could not leave the village where he had lived his entire life. It took 113 days for 29 people who eventually survived to break through the blockade and reach the un-occupied Dashkasan region of Azerbaijan. **The fate of the remaining 32 people was, unfortunately, tragic. 17 of them were killed, one of them died of heart attack, 14 were taken hostage.**³⁴

According to the people who survived, prior to the attack by Armenians on April 18, three Armenian militants visited Gayabashi grottos, where 62 people were hiding. On that day, they used binoculars to observe the grotto. Two of the militants remained near the grotto in a vehicle, while one returned towards the village center. After some time, more militants arrived in vehicles, including a "Niva," a "UAZ," and a "ZIL 131," and

³⁴Kazimov, K. 2013: *Bashlibel Tragedy: Armenian Atrocities through the Eyes of Witnesses*, QHT Publishing House, Baku.

surrounded the grotto. After around 7 hours of fighting between the villagers and invaders, Armenian forces, having wounded or killed some villagers, managed to approach the grotto. “Armenians came closer to the grotto and called people to get out in the Azerbaijani language. Some of the women and elderly people got out. Armenians took those people hostage and gathered them to a place named ‘Portda’ in front of Gayabashi grotto”, the survivors say.³⁵

According to them, in the evening of April 18, it seemed as though nature itself wanted to aid the innocent victims who had fallen prey to the heavily armed Armenian terrorists. Heavy snow and a terrible blizzard made it difficult for the Armenians to remain near the grotto for an extended period. Consequently, they fired into the grotto once more, hurled a few grenades, and eventually departed from the area. After they left, those who survived were divided into three groups.

After the brutal attack on April 18, the remaining people managed to reunite at Nabi grotto one week later. However, their struggles were far from over, as they would soon face even more severe challenges. They didn’t want to leave the area without burying those who were killed on April 18. However, this task was not easy, as there was a constant risk that Armenians might launch an attack on Gayabashi grotto at any moment. Consequently, the burial of those who lost their lives in the grotto could only be carried out 24 days after the massacre, on May 12. The victims, namely Mahammad Amraliyev, Chingiz Amraliyev, Surxay Amraliyev, Aygun Amraliyeva, Yagub Samadov, Busat Ahmadova, Zovgiyya Ahmadova, Gulgaz Jafarova, Chichak Hasanova, Gulara Jafarova, Ahliman Asgarov and Vugar Abdullayev, were buried according to Muslim traditions.

On April 24, 2021, following the liberation of Kalbajar during the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan’s law-enforcement agencies successfully located the burial sites of these twelve victims in front of the grotto. The bodies of 12 people killed in Bashlibel were exhumed and brought to the Forensic Medical Expertise and Pathological Anatomy Union in Baku, where appropriate investigative actions were carried out. The results of DNA analysis, molecular-genetic and other characteristics of the remains of the victims of the tragedy and their family members confirmed that they were shot and killed by the Armenian military. After a four-month investigation, a decision was made to return the exhumed bodies to their previous location and bury them there. The corpses, wrapped in the Azerbaijani flag, were sent to Bashlibel village to be buried in their previous place. In addition to the family members of the victims of the tragedy, villagers who survived the massacre also participated in the funeral ceremony.

During the invasion of Bashlibel by the Armed Forces of Armenia, 19 innocent people were taken hostage. Although they were eventually released and returned to Azerbaijan, it was a harrowing ordeal as they endured cruel and brutal torture while in captivity. Zeynab

³⁵Ibid. p. 133.

Hasanova, one of the hostages, bore witness to the inhumane treatment inflicted by the Armenians upon a deaf and mute Bashlibel named Huseyn Mansimov:

“The Armenians demanded various information from Huseyn Mansimov. Initially, they believed that he was deliberately refusing to respond, and in response, they brutally beat him in Bashlibel. They struck him on the head with the butt of a gun so forcefully that he remained unconscious for several days. [Later they brought us to Khankandi]. I also witnessed him being beaten during the initial days in Khankandi. As time went on, they separated us and held us in different locations. In December of 1993, most of the hostages were gathered together, and some were released. Huseyn Mansimov also expressed his desire to be among the hostages exchanged by the Armenians, but they severely injured him and returned him to captivity. Huseyn Mansimov was eventually released on April 4, 1994. However, the emotional and physical toll inflicted upon him during his captivity was immense. Despite enduring the spiritual tremors and tortures for a year, he succumbed to his injuries and passed away on February 23, 1995.”³⁶

Another Bashlibel-born person who was taken hostage together with his brother says they were also subject to torture and mistreatment:

“The scars of the tortures committed during my captivity still persist. My body bears dozens of cigarette burn marks. On one dreadful day, Armenian terrorists struck me on the head with a section of an iron bed so brutally that I remained unconscious for several days.”³⁷

Survivors of the Bashlibel Massacre escaped the Armenian forces.

After having buried their relatives and family members, those who had survived started to explore possible ways to leave the village. However, the people who tuned in to the radio every day held on to the belief that the Azerbaijani army would soon liberate Kalbajar from occupation. The UN Security Council’s resolution 822, calling for the unconditional withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from Kalbajar, along with Turkish President Turgut Özal’s visit to Azerbaijan, instilled further hope in their hearts. Yet, with the passing of time, the death of Turgut Özal, Suret Huseynov’s rebellion against the central government in Baku, and intensified attacks of Armenia’s Armed Forces on

³⁶Ibid. pp. 176-177.

³⁷Ibid. p. 179

Aghdam shattered their hopes for Kalbajar's liberation. The siege made it increasingly difficult to find food, forcing them to repeatedly journey to various villages like Bashlibel, Khallanli, Chovdar, Shahkaram, Aghjakand, Orujlu, and Moz Garachanli in search of sustenance. During these trips, Ismat Azizov, Mahir Jafarov, Salim Mehdiyev, and Jallat Abbasov were repeatedly faced with the threat of death.

In those days, the people who were hiding around Bashlibel came across six other people from Bashlibel who were hiding in a neighboring village called Shahkerem. Together they set up a plan to leave the area. It was decided that Gadim Gadimov, one of those 29 people who were around Bashlibel, would join those six people who remained in Shahkerem village and together depart for the Dashkasan region, an Azerbaijani district neighboring Kalbajar. Their plan was to make their way to Dashkasan first to make sure that the road was safe to take women and children. If they managed to reach Dashkasan safely, they would then broadcast an encrypted message on the radio. Luckily, Gadim Gadimov and his group safely arrived in Dashkasan and broadcasted such a message via radio:

“Ismat, Mahir, Humbat and Alakbar are requested to come to the headquarters in Khanlar region. Their relatives are waiting for them therein”.³⁸

It was now time also for others to depart. It was not, however, possible to convince the oldest member of the group, the 103-years old Alasgar Kazimov, to leave Bashlibel. Salim Mehdiyev, one of the people who survived, said some details about Kazimov:

“The day before our departure, Alasgar kishi didn't mention anything about wanting to stay in Bashlibel. However, on the following day, just as we were about to set out, he expressed his decision not to leave. I reassured Alasgar baba (grandfather) that if he grew tired during the journey, the younger men would carry him on their backs. We were determined to face whatever challenges lay ahead as a united group - to survive or perish together. In that moment, tears rolled down his cheeks. He pleaded with us to help his grandchildren and fellow villagers escape the blockade and make it out alive. Despite our persistent efforts to persuade him otherwise, Alasgar kishi remained steadfast in his decision to spend the rest of his days in his beloved native village.”³⁹

Having prepared some food for the trip and determining the itinerary to reach the Dashkasan region, the group of 28 people, including 5 women and 5 children, left

³⁸Ibid. p. 140

³⁹Ibid. 186-187.

Bashlibel with a hope to save their lives, their children and families, under the constant threat and fear of being killed or taken hostage. Several times throughout the journey, they came very close to Armenian forces. One major challenge for them was crossing the Tartar River on July 18. Khalid Kazimov, the author of the book *“Bashlibel Tragedy: Armenian Atrocities through the Eyes of Witnesses”* (2013), described the story on the basis of his interviews with the survivors:

“Taking into account the risk of crossing the Tartar River in the daytime, they pitched a camp and waited for the darkness. However, the shallow part of the river was near to the bridge that was under Armenian control. Though there was an Armenian post near the bridge, there was no alternative way. They could take women, children and elderly people only from this part of fast running Tartar River. They started to cross the river at 20:45 in the evening of July 18. Mahir, Ismat and Salim pioneered to cross the river which is much more tumultuous in spring. The youth fixed advance prepared rope to a tree on the other bank of the Tartar River and first, took the children, then the women and elderly people in two hours. Nevertheless, the group twice faced the risk of being captured.”⁴⁰

After enduring a four-month-long struggle for survival, the group had become adept at evading the watchful eyes of the Armenian forces and navigating through their checkpoints. Finally, on July 22, they arrived at the outskirts of Dashkasan, yet their disbelief lingered. At 3 am, a distant light flickered before their eyes, leaving them uncertain whether it was from Dashkasan’s or the settlements of Armenia, fearing they might have veered off course. Khalid Kazimov writes that:

“It was already 3 a.m. July 22. After having a little rest, the group decided to go towards the light. So, they saw a shepherd herding sheep in a pasture at the foot of the mountain. There was no alternative. They decided to come up to the shepherd and ask where the place they arrived at was... They asked to the shepherd where the place was and understood that they were already in Dashkasan.”

This meant the group of 28 people, including 5 women and 5 children, had survived the invasion by Armenia’s Armed Forces after 113 days.

⁴⁰Kazimov, K. 2013: *Bashlibel Tragedy: Armenian Atrocities through the Eyes of Witnesses*, QHT Publishing House, Baku, pp. 141-142.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE OCCUPATION

Multiple regulations within International Humanitarian Law (IHL) are in place to protect the environment amidst armed conflicts. In fact, as long as the natural environment is not considered a military target, it is classified as a civilian entity and, as a result, cannot be subjected to attacks. Rule 43 of the ICRC Rules of Customary International Humanitarian Law

provides that:

“The general principles on the conduct of hostilities apply to the natural environment:

A. No part of the natural environment may be attacked, unless it is a military objective.

B. Destruction of any part of the natural environment is prohibited, unless required by imperative military necessity.

C. Launching an attack against a military objective which may be expected to cause incidental damage to the environment which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated is prohibited.”⁴¹

Hence, the international humanitarian law prohibits the destruction of the natural environment as a weapon. In a similar way, “Attacks against the natural environment by way of reprisals are forbidden” according to Article 55 of Additional Protocol I.

The Republic of Armenia flagrantly violated all these principles and provisions of the international humanitarian law during the First Karabakh War, in its aftermath, as well as during and after the Second Karabakh War.

The environmental damage of the occupation of up to 20 percent of the Azerbaijani territories by Armenia has been overarching and cannot be fully recovered in a short period of time. According to the studies that Azerbaijan made prior to the occupation, the occupied territories hosted 260,300 hectares of forests that were home to over 460 native tree and shrub species, with more than 15 percent of them found exclusively in this region. Before the war, 24 rare animal species and 27 plant species were protected in state

⁴¹ J. Henckaerts and L. Doswald-Beck (eds), Customary International Humanitarian Law, Vol. I: The Rules (ICRC, Cambridge, 2005), Rule 43, p. 143.

reserves like Basut-Chay and Garagol, as well as other protected areas including Arazboyu, Lachin, Gubadly, and Dashalty.

For approximately three decades, Azerbaijan had no control over this region, creating favorable conditions for the occupying forces to ruthlessly exploit and plunder its natural resources. This illegal activity, combined with the failure of local authorities to take action against environmental threats like fires caused by the activities of the settled population, resulted in often irreparable damage to the region's environment. The Azerbaijani government collected information that illegal exploitation of Kalbajar's natural resources and minerals started soon after the occupation of the region and illegally involved some international companies. Since 2002, the Base Metals company, affiliated with the Vallex Group of Armenia and registered in Liechtenstein, had been unlawfully mining the Kizilbulag copper-gold deposit near Heyvali village in Kalbajar. Additionally, since 2007, the GPM Gold company, a subsidiary of GeoProMining, had been involved in operating the Soyudlu gold deposit within the Kalbajar region. The images taken by Azerbaijan's satellite operator Azercosmos revealed that the mining activities were expanded over time. The highway built by Armenians to connect Agdara region of Azerbaijan within the former NKAO and Basarkecher (Vardenis) district of Armenia that passed through Kalbajar was used to transport illegally obtained natural resources from the occupied territories, including Kalbajar, to Armenia and international markets.

The post-Soviet leaders of Armenia were internationally criticized for exploiting the environment to generate economic benefits.⁴²In 2008, Armenian reporters Edik Baghdasaryan and Armine Petrosyan of the *Hetq.am* media agency of Armenia found out that the wood exports of Armenia had been constantly rising since the end of the Soviet period.⁴³

“According to the Customs Department and the Statistical Office of Armenia, the volume of wood exported from Armenia has risen sharply over the last four years. During the Soviet era, the republic imported, rather than exported, wood. Today the nearly forestless Armenia exports not only wood products but raw timber as well.”

There is no doubt that the exported woods were derived not only from the Armenian forests, but also from those located in Azerbaijan's occupied regions, or, more probably,

⁴² European Union Action to Fight Environmental Crime (2015), “Environmental Crime in Armenia”, available at: https://efface.eu/sites/default/files/EFFACE_Environmental%20crime%20in%20Armenia_A%20case%20study%20on%20mining.pdf (Accessed: 28 September 2020).

⁴³ HETQ (2008), “Armenia cuts down its forests for export”, available at: <https://hetq.am/en/article/7007> (Accessed: 28 September 2020).

the Azerbaijani forests were the only source. This is confirmed by the Armenian reporters of *Hetq.am*, who revealed in November 2018 that 2.3 times more trees were cut down in the formerly occupied territories of Azerbaijan than in the Republic of Armenia in 2012-2016.⁴⁴ This situation was observed by the satellite imagery of the region obtained by Azerbaijan’s satellite operator Azercosmos. Azerbaijan’s ecology experts warned that:

“Upon the occupation of the Azerbaijani territories by Armenia, walnut, oak and other tree species were cut down and sold to foreign countries, and forests for cattle grazing were massively destroyed in some of the occupied regions. Some tree and shrub species, which were protected for many years such as yew-tree, Araz oak, Eastern plane, pomegranate, forest grapes, Buasye pear, box(-tree), Eldar pinewood, persimmon (date-palm), willow leafed pear, etc. are now on the edge of vanishing. From the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, the amount of forest and woodland declined by 12.5%.”

Notably, this observation was confirmed by Armenian sources. For example, a report dated September 2003 revealed that walnut trees cut down *en masse* in Azerbaijan’s occupied territories were being exported to Italy and Spain, adding that the claims of local authorities about the export of damaged or rotten trees sounded unconvincing.⁴⁵ The report showed that the exported wood was “of the highest quality, and was used for luxury car interiors and gun hilts,” citing a local expert who stated that “even trees in cemeteries had been torn up by the roots. Some gravestones had been damaged as a result.”

The formerly occupied regions of Azerbaijan are also rich with water resources which are rapidly shrinking in the entire South Caucasus, thus posing a variety of challenges to the lives of the region’s people and maintenance of agriculture. While in the rest of the region local states could take some measures to ameliorate the situation, the Azerbaijani government had no access to water resources in the occupied region up until the end of the 44 Day War.

Describing this as “green genocide,” Azerbaijan sought to draw international attention to the rapid deterioration of the ecological situation in the regions under occupation. The Council of Europe, in its resolution 2085 (2016) confirming the distressing level of water-related environmental problems in the Karabakh territories, stressed that “the lack of regular maintenance work for over twenty years on the Sarsang reservoir, located in one of the areas

⁴⁴ HETQ (2018), “The volume of deforestation in Artsakh is 2.3 times more than in Armenia” (Արցախում մանտառահատու մների ծավալը 2,3 անգամ ավել է, քան Հայաստանում), available at: <https://hetq.am/hy/article/97849> (Accessed: 9 September 2021).

⁴⁵ HETQ (2003), “Walnut trees cut down in Karabakh”, available at: <https://hetq.am/en/article/7083> (Accessed: 28 September 2020).

of Azerbaijan occupied by Armenia, poses a danger to the whole border region.”⁴⁶ The Assembly emphasized that “the state of disrepair of the Sarsang dam could result in a major disaster with great loss of human life and possibly a fresh humanitarian crisis.”

The environment in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan was also threatened during the occupation period by the indifference shown by local Armenian authorities with respect to the natural disasters that undermined the region’s natural balance. This was most painfully observed when wildfires erupted in the region and spiral out of control because of the lack of an effective fire-management system.

This was well-documented thanks to the cooperation of the OSCE during the first series of massive wildfires that overran an area amounting to 163.3 km² in the eastern part of the then occupied Azerbaijani territories in summer 2006. The fact that the Armenian authorities appeared to be rather apathetic regarding taking immediate measures to extinguish the fires in time outraged the Azerbaijani people, and they called for international intervention.

On September 7, 2006, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution titled “The situation in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan” proposed by Azerbaijan in regard to the incidents of massive fires taking place in the formerly occupied territories. The resolution of the General Assembly stressed the necessity of urgently conducting an environmental operation and called for an assessment of the short- and long-term effects of the fires on the environment of the region and measures for its rehabilitation.

The OSCE fact-finding mission, carried out from October 4 to 12, 2006, assessed the fires’ short- and long-term impacts on the environment in the affected territories and confirmed, *inter alia*, that “the fires resulted in environmental and economic damages and threatened human health and security.” The assessment also concluded that the damage caused by wildfires could partially be attributed also to the absence of effective forest fire management systems.⁴⁷ This negligence, violating international humanitarian law including the Geneva Conventions of 1949, resulted in the devastation of wildlife and destruction of fertile areas in the region and transformed the entire fire-affected territories into a burned desert in less than two months. An assessment by Azerbaijani experts lamented that:

***“The productive humus layer of the soil has been destroyed and it will take many years to rehabilitate this fertile layer. Many trees constituting the microclimate together with grasses and bushes have been burned as well.*”**

⁴⁶ Council of Europe (2016), “Inhabitants of frontier regions of Azerbaijan are deliberately deprived of water”, available at: <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-EN.asp?fileid=22429&lang=en> (Accessed: 28 September 2020).

⁴⁷ Global Fire Monitoring Center (2019), “OSCE and GFMC Activities in Southeast Europe, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia 2006-2019”, available at: http://gfmcc.online/GlobalNetworks/%20%20SEEurope/SEEurope_8.html (Accessed: 28 September 2020).

The area has become black. Extermination or migration to other territories of numerous fauna species caused a great, and in many cases an irreversible damage to the biodiversity of the fire-affected territories.”

Concerns relating to environmental hazards in the region have also been voiced by European institutions. For example, the Council of Europe, in its resolution 2085 (2016), noted that it “deplores the fact that the occupation by Armenia of Nagorno-Karabakh and other adjacent areas of Azerbaijan creates... humanitarian and environmental problems for the citizens of Azerbaijan living in the Lower Karabakh valley.”⁴⁸ The resolution also stressed that the lack of regular maintenance work on the regional water reservoirs poses a danger to the whole border region and “could result in a major disaster with great loss of human life and possibly a fresh humanitarian crisis.” Following the Second Karabakh War in 2020, when Azerbaijan successfully liberated its occupied territories, Armenians, deeply frustrated by significant losses and their failure, engaged in widespread destruction of the lands they had been occupying. As per the trilateral statement signed on November 10, it was specified that Armenians were required to leave the Kalbajar region by November 15, the Aghdam region by November 20, and the Lachin region by December 1. At the request of Armenia to give the Armenian settlers time to move out, Azerbaijan agreed to postpone the takeover of Kalbajar until November 25.

During the handover of the Kalbajar region to Azerbaijan, which was mandated by the November agreement, there were notable instances of large-scale ecological damage. As the Armenian residents, who had illegally settled in Kalbajar after the occupation in 1993, were leaving, they engaged in severe deforestation by cutting down trees. The felled trees were then transported in large trucks from Kalbajar as the Armenians left the region. Disturbing videos have also surfaced, showing the remains of decapitated horses and scattered donkeys throughout Kalbajar. It was reported that Armenians killed the animals which they cannot take with them to Armenia. Additionally, Armenians resorted to setting fire to their homes to prevent them from being taken by Azerbaijanis. In November 2020, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan protested this environmental crime Armenians committed after the Second Karabakh War, stating that “There are 24,000 hectares of forest in Kalbajar district... Armenians are burning forests to create an environmental catastrophe... They cut down forests and take them to Armenia for sale. They burn down houses that they did not build. They had entered the houses of the people of Kalbajar after the occupation in 1993, broke into them and lived there. [They now burn down these houses as they are required to leave the area per the trilateral statement of November 10, 2020]. They burn down schools and kill pets that they cannot take with them.”

⁴⁸ Council of Europe (2016), “Inhabitants of frontier regions of Azerbaijan are deliberately deprived of water”, available at: <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-EN.asp?fileid=22429&lang=en> (Accessed: 28 September 2020).

LIST OF THE AZERBAIJANIS KILLED BY ARMENIAN ARMED FORCES IN BASHLIBEL



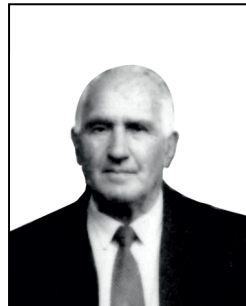
*Abdullayev
Vugar Isa (1971,
Zardab district).
Killed by
Armenian Armed
Forces in
Bashlibel on
April 18, 1993.*



*Aghamirov
Genaet Ismayil
(1940,
Bashlibel). Killed
by Armenian
Armed Forces on
April 5, 1993.*



*Babayev Abbas
Huseyn
(1928, Bashlibel)
. Killed by
Armenian Armed
Forces on April
2, 1993.*



*Baghirov Hasan
Azim (1912,
Bashlibel). On
April 2, 1993, a
helicopter carrying
Hasan Baghirov
and his team was
shot down by
Armenian forces.*



*Bayramov Teymur
Maharram (1955,
Khallanli village of
Kalbajar). Killed
by Armenian
Armed Forces in
April, 1993.*



*Jafarova Gulara
Jafar (1925,
Bashlibel). Killed
by Armenian
Armed Forces on
April 18, 1993.*



*Jafarova Gulgaz
Ahmad (1905,
Bashlibel). Killed
by Armenian
Armed Forces on
April 18, 1993.*



*Ahmadova Busat
Alish (1939,
Bashlibel). Killed
by Armenian
Armed Forces on
April 18, 1993.*



Ahmadova Zovgiyya Binnat (1981, Bashlibel). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces on April 18, 1993.



Aliyeva Tutu Mansim (1926, Bashlibel). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces in April, 1993.



Amraliyev Mahammad Abish (1933, Bashlibel). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces on April 18, 1993.



Amraliyev Surkhay Mahammad (1964, Bashlibel). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces on April 18, 1993.



Amraliyev Chingiz Mahammad (1972, Bashlibel). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces on April 18, 1993.



Amraliyeva Aygun Mahammad (1977, Bashlibel). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces on April 18, 1993.



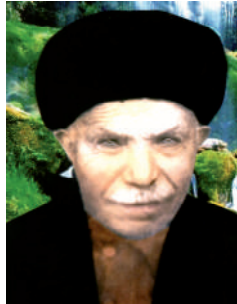
Asgarov Ahliman Avaz (1941, Dambulag village of Lachin region). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces on April 18, 1993.



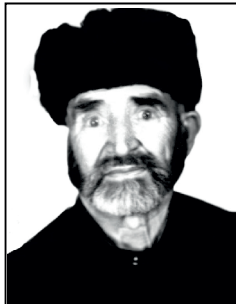
Fattahova Chichak Taghi (1935, Bashlibel). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces on April 3, 1993.



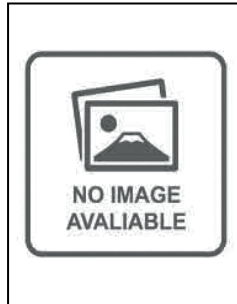
Hasanova Chichak Mikayil (1926, Bashlibel). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces on April 18, 1993.



Huseynov Huseyn Salim (1917, Takhtabashi village of Kalbajar). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces on April 19, 1993.



Isayev Abdulali Salim (1890, Bashlibel). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces in April, 1993.



Isayeva Gizbas Fattah (1900, Bashlibel). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces in April, 1993.



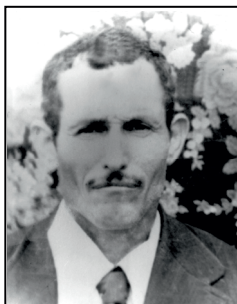
Isayeva Hamayil Abdulali (1939, Bashlibel). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces in April, 1993.



Kazimova Naiba Alzaman (1967, Chovdar village of Kalbajar). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces on April 2, 1993.



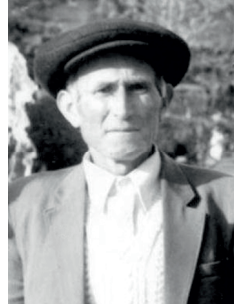
Gadimova Mayakhanim Jalil (1895, Geshtak village of Kalbajar). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces in Bashlibel on April, 1993.



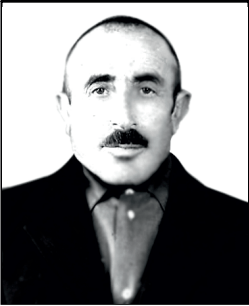
Salahov Ahmad Fattah (1929, Bashlibel). Killed by Armenian Armed Forces on April 2, 1993.



*Salahova Pari
Abdulrahim
(1891,
Bashlibel). Killed
by Armenian
Armed Forces in
April, 1993.*



*Samadov Yagub
Isa (1930,
Bashlibel). Killed
by Armenian
Armed Forces on
April 18, 1993.*



*Yusifov Huseyn
Hasan (1918,
Bashlibel). Died of
heart attack while
hiding from the
Armenian forces in
Gayabashi grotto
April 10, 1993.*

LIST OF THE AZERBAIJANIS TAKEN HOSTAGE BY ARMENIAN ARMED FORCES DURING THE OCCUPATION OF BASHLIBEL



*Babayeva Kubra
Gadim (1901,
Bashlibel). Taken
hostage by
Armenian Armed
Forces in
Bashlibel on April
18, 1993.*



*Ahmadov Binnat
Abdulali (1937,
Bashlibel).
Taken hostage by
Armenian Armed
Forces in
Bashlibel on
April 18, 1993.*



*Ahmadov Niyyat
Binnat (1980,
Bashlibel).
Taken hostage by
Armenian Armed
Forces in
Bashlibel on
April 18, 1993.*



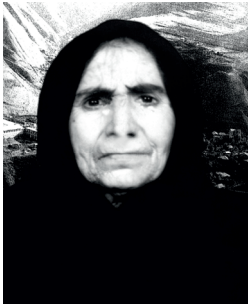
*Ahmadova
Shargiyya Binnat
(1978, Bashlibel).
Taken hostage by
Armenian Armed
Forces in
Bashlibel on April
18, 1993.*



*Amraliyeva Arzu
Binnat (1972,
Bashlibel).
Taken hostage by
Armenian Armed
Forces in
Bashlibel on
April 18, 1993.*



*Amraliyeva
Zibeyda Abish
(1937, Bashlibel).
Taken hostage by
Armenian Armed
Forces in
Bashlibel on April
18, 1993.*



*Hasanova Leyli Ali
(1926, Bashlibel).
Taken hostage by
Armenian Armed
Forces in
Bashlibel on April
18, 1993.*



*Hasanova
Marmar Javad
(1935, Bashlibel).
Taken hostage by
Armenian Armed
Forces in
Bashlibel on April
18, 1993.*



Hasanova Shamama Huseyn (1930, Bashlibel). Taken hostage by Armenian Armed Forces in Bashlibel on April 18, 1993.



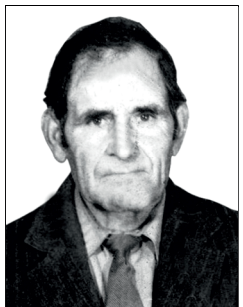
Hasanova Zeynab Mahmud (1957, Bashlibel). Taken hostage by Armenian Armed Forces in Bashlibel on April 18, 1993.



Gasimova Tutu Ali (1930, Orujlu village of Kalbajar). Taken hostage by Armenian Armed Forces on April 18, 1993.



Mahammadov Hokmdar Surkhay (1991, Bashlibel). Taken hostage by Armenian Armed Forces on April 18, 1993.



Mansimov Huseyn Imran (1928, Bashlibel). Taken hostage by Armenian Armed Forces on April 18, 1993.



Mirzayev Isa Sadig (1934, Bashlibel). Taken hostage by Armenian Armed Forces on April 2, 1993.



Shahbandayev Imdad Shamil (1964, Bashlibel). Taken hostage by Armenian Armed Forces on April 2, 1993.



Shahbandayev Osman Shamil (1965, Bashlibel). Taken hostage by Armenian Armed Forces on April 2, 1993.



***Shahverdiyev
Tahmaz Gudrat
(1969,
Bashlibel).
Taken hostage by
Armenian Armed
Forces on April
2, 1993.***



***Salimov Alakbar
Abdulali (1954,
Bashlibel).
Taken hostage by
Armenian Armed
Forces on April
2, 1993.***



***Yusifova Shamama
Agha (1920,
Bashlibel). Taken
hostage by
Armenian Armed
Forces in
Bashlibel on April
18, 1993.***



Photo 8. A wedding ceremony in Bashlibel, few years before the occupation



Photo 9. A wedding ceremony in Bashlibel, few years before the occupation



Photo 10. The burial sites of the victims of Bashlibel massacre, April 2021.



Photo 11. The burial sites of the victims of Bashlibel massacre, April 2021.



Photo 12. The burial sites of the victims of Bashlibel massacre, April 2021.



Photo 13. The burial sites of the victims of Bashlibel massacre, April 2021.



Photo 14. The burial sites of the victims of Bashlibel massacre, April 2021.



Photo 15. The victims were re-buried after the investigations completed, September 2021.



Photo 16. Gravestones desecrated in Bashlibel during the occupation



Photo 17. Gravestones desecrated in Bashlibel during the occupation



Photo 18. The remnants of the Bashlibel village school, which was destroyed and looted during the occupation



Photo 19. The remnants of the bath house and Communication Junction building destroyed and looted during the occupation (Bashlibel)



Photo 20. The remnants of the Kindergarten and House of Culture building of Bashlibel village



Photo 21. The remnants of the Bashlibel village hospital, which was destroyed and looted during the occupation

**ARMENIA'S ETHNIC CLEANSING AND
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