



## Genocide Watch: Armenian POWs in Azerbaijan

After a bloody day of bombardment in September 2023, Armenians [scrambled](#) to escape Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh). Azerbaijani military barred a select few from leaving. The prisoners are mostly Artsakh state officials, but civilians and Nagorno-Karabakh war veterans were arrested as well. Among these individuals was [Ruben Vardanyan](#), a businessman and philanthropist who left his comfortable life in Russia to involve himself in Artsakh's government during the blockade. Vardanyan has been on a [hunger strike](#) since February 19th to demand the immediate release of Armenian prisoners. His life hangs in the balance as Azerbaijani sham trials [continue](#).

On March 5th, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) [confirmed](#) that the Azerbaijani government has shut down its operations in the country. The ICRC is the only organization with access to the Armenian prisoners held in Baku. Their expulsion from the country is due to the suspicions of actions against the Azerbaijani Army during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, [claiming](#) the ICRC is guilty of "anti-Turkish chauvinism." However, an August 2024 report by the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, [revealed](#) that the Azerbaijani government intentionally impeded the humanitarian efforts of the ICRC during the blockade. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Refugee Agency have also been told to leave, Azerbaijan [claims](#) that its government is now capable of handling Nagorno-Karabakh and is not in need of international support.

Prior to the forced displacement of Artsakhtsi Armenians, Armenians were arrested for crimes as simple as smuggling aid into blockaded and starving Artsakh. Gevorg Sujyan and Davit Davityan were charged with espionage for taking humanitarian aid to Shushi on the final day of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War; they are now serving 15 year sentences.

The Center for Truth and Justice [reports](#) that Azerbaijan's treatment of Armenian POWs violates international human rights law, specifically the Third Geneva Convention. [POWs](#) are physically and psychologically [tortured](#), denied council, and denied the right to defense during trials which occur in Azerbaijani with no translation.

The American human rights lawyer, Jared Genser, representing Vardanyan [urged](#) Armenian PM, Nikol Pashinyan, to take a harder stance pushing for the release of prisoners. He also [requests](#) the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe sends "trial monitors" to Baku, appealing to the US and EU.

Pashinyan has received increased criticism for his appeasement tactics with Turkey and Azerbaijan, even going as far as [perpetuating](#) Armenian Genocide denial rhetoric. On March 3rd, Pashinyan responded to opposition lawmakers and protesters, defending his stance on Armenian POWs. He [claims](#) he needs to act in a reasonable manner with the interests of the Armenian state in mind, not the disproportionate focus on one individual.

The actions of the Azerbaijani government regarding the mistreatment of Armenians in the aftermath of genocide in Artsakh indicates that the country is in **Stage 8: Persecution**.

In Vardanyan's February 19th statement, he poignantly [said](#), "Silence in the face of such violations paves the way for future tragedies, fueling hostility and a new wave of hatred."