

# Post-war priorities: Resettlement of forcibly displaced persons



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## Number and typology of forcibly displaced persons

The 44-day large-scale military actions in Artsakh have had and will continue to have grave consequences. One of the key priorities in the aftermath of war is addressing the issues of forcibly displaced persons (FDP). How many people have suffered forced displacement from their homes; how these people can be categorized in terms of their needs; what general characteristics describe these groups and how they make decisions about their future, are questions yet quite difficult to answer. It seems that no official statistics and evidence are still available.

However, the expert community (and again, these are not official statistics and evidence) estimates that about 100-110 thousand people were forcibly displaced during the war. The majority, 90-100 thousand moved to Armenia; the rest moved to a different community in Artsakh. According to expert estimates, about 50,000 have already returned to Artsakh. It should be emphasized again that these are merely expert estimates, as there are no official mechanisms, based on well-defined methodologies, for monitoring and assessing the situation. This is only an expert opinion based on various practice-based analyses and local evidence.

Some of the FDPs are from communities which have remained under the control of Armenian forces, and this means that people can return home. A small subgroup within this category is people whose houses have been destroyed in the result of military actions. Many buildings have suffered during these actions, but this is not about broken windows, which are rapidly being repaired with the support of the government. The buildings where the mentioned subgroup had lived before the war have been seriously damaged. In some cases the houses have been totally destroyed, and new ones should be built, and therefore construction will take quite long. The second subgroup is the people whose houses/apartments are still intact, and they still can return and reside there. However, not all have returned and some do not want to return at all.

The second large group of FDPs is people from the territories of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) currently under the control of Azerbaijan: the town of Shushi, Karintak, the town of Hadrut and the whole region of Hadrut, several communities in Askeran, Martuni, southern communities of Kashatagh, Mataghis and Talish communities of Martakert region. People displaced from these communities have had no chance of taking any possessions during the move, and in fact, they need everything and anything.

The third group is people previously residing in the regions surrounding Nagorno Karabakh: the region of Shahumyan, except Charektar and Aknaberd communities, though the residents of Charektar burned their houses and left the village because of the uncertainty regarding the status of their community; northern communities of Kashatagh, Vazgenashen community of Martuni region and six communities in Martakert region.

The fourth group is people from Berdzor, Aghavno and Nerkin Sus. Given the critical uncertainties and long-term security risks, people have moved from their communities. These three communities are within the corridor between Armenia and Artsakh, and the status of the corridor is still an issue of foreign policy and negotiations.

Overall, based on some expert estimates, about 40 thousand people from Artsakh have lost their homes: 10-12 thousand are from the returned territories, and the rest are from the former NKAO. This means that the majority of people from Artsakh who have been left without homes have been



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deprived of everything else as well, including property, household items, clothes. The majority of these people currently reside in Armenia, and only about 5000 have returned to Artsakh.

We need to consider the high likelihood of the scenario when the majority of people from Kashatagh and Shahumyan will most probably not return to their homes, because these are people who have resettled there from Armenia. Many have strong social ties in Armenia, and some have a residence there. In some cases the houses and apartments where they reside currently need renovation, but the conditions are sufficient for temporary shelter for now. Some of the people from Armenia who had resettled in Artsakh have been displaced twice. In Shahumyan region, mostly those originally from Shahumyan, and some refugees from Azerbaijan, reside in Aknaber, which should have been resettled according to a state programme. Aknaber, which is in fact on the territory of Martakert, is on the shores of Sarsang reservoir. As an administrative unit, it is under the jurisdiction of Shahumyan region, and the current residents are those originally from Shahumyan. However, some residents are refugees from Azerbaijan and other areas, and they face more complex issues, because they do not have residence in Armenia and largely want to return to Aknaber.

It is expected that in one or two months about 20-25 thousand people will have to return if the Armenian government does not design a large-scale programme of resettlement in Armenia.

### **Issues related to organizing the FDP return**

Certainly, the long-term goal is for FDPs to return to Artsakh, so that in a long run we have permanent population in Artsakh who will live in and develop Artsakh in the hope that some time in the future we will have a better demographic and security situation. Currently, the most serious challenge in organizing the return of FDPs in uncertainty, first and foremost, the uncertainty regarding security and safety, and second, the uncertainty associated with addressing social issues.

Considering the fact that the war in Artsakh has resulted in serious social-economic challenges in Artsakh, and that these challenges pose great risks for Artsakhi people currently residing in Armenia, it is of paramount importance to understand the scope of people who have suffered the consequences of war. First, how many people have lost their homes and property if their communities are currently under the Azerbaijani control? Second, if the communities are under the Armenian control, how many people have lost their residences, mobile and other property in the result of rocket fire and shelling? Thus, there is a need to take inventory and register the actual losses.

To support the groups of FDPs in need, first, it is necessary to understand where they are presently, how many of them need homes and sustainable income, and only then it is necessary to analyse these issues from the perspective of short-, mid- and long-term needs and priorities.

Support programmes should be classified in two broad categories. First, there should be the programmes which are implemented in Artsakh and Armenia, considering the fact that many people from Artsakh are still in Armenia. These programmes should be based on one key principle: create all the necessary prerequisites, specifically favourable conditions for these people to return to Artsakh.

The key priority for the people forcibly displaced from their communities in Artsakh and having lost their homes is the issue of their residence. Some have solved the issue by finding temporary shelter with relatives, but obviously this is a short-term solution. The government of the Republic of Artsakh has provided residence to some people in hotels, schools and other public buildings, which cannot be considered a long-term solution either, especially since many of these people do not have income, and there are quite few food support programmes.

The Russian Federation has announced about construction of fast assembly emergency shelters, but considering that it is winter and many people spend the night wherever they can, in cars, garages, parks, we need fast solutions. One option is to discuss the possibility of constructing tent cities. The Armed Forces and the Ministry of Emergency Situations are the ones with resources and capacity to ensure plausibility of this option. Perhaps it will be possible to secure the Russian support in this regard as well.



In terms of food security, it is necessary to register those in need, specifically those who do not have sustainable income, and to provide them with food. The food can be delivered to the temporary shelters, hotels, schools, wherever FDPs have been provided with shelter. For those who have found shelter in different places on their own, specific food areas need to be established from where people can get food packages. Depending on the number of people in different FDP groups, volunteers can be mobilised to deliver food packages to the elderly and people with disabilities.

There are also groups of people who on their own have found shelter in buildings intended for living or any other building even if not habitable, but they do not have heating, and other minimally acceptable living conditions. With little expenses efficiently managed it is possible to address the mentioned needs and ensure minimally acceptable living conditions for these people in order for them not to leave Artsakh.

There is also a serious need for restructuring the government of Artsakh, to mobilize the public capacity and invest resources according to the current priorities. The public agencies and services responsible for the social welfare of the population of Artsakh are overburdened and overworked, but there are public agencies which can address issues within their mandates with comparatively small resources.

*The policy brief is elaborated based on the results of the online off-the-record discussion "Resettlement of forcibly displaced people of Artsakh: issues and solutions", held on 06.12.2020. The online discussion brought together state officials, independent experts and representatives of international development partners.*

