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Refugees, displaced persons and asylum seekers in Armenia

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Armenia first came to know the painful phenomenon of the refugee and IDP population in the course of its recent history, in 1998. It was at the end of this year that people escaping from the Armenian pogroms in the Azeri city of Sumgant arrived in Armenia.

Given the deepening interethnic conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh, the refugee problem further intensified, resulting in an inflow that became massive in scope.

From 1988-1991, Armenia received a total of more than 360 thousand refugees from Azerbaijan, not only of Armenian nationality but also of minority nationalities who had been living in the territory of Azerbaijan. At the same time, because of the sharp increase in interethnic distrust and tension from 1989-1991, approximately 170 thousand ethnic Azeris who had been living in Armenia were forced to flee the country.

Besides this main stream of refugees, Armenia also received approximately 60 thousand ethnic Armenians, refugees, and IDPs during this period from other regions of interethnic conflict in the USSR (Abkhazia and Northern Ossetia, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.)¹

The refugees were and still are the only post-Soviet inter-state migration flows to cause a population growth in Armenia— an increase of 250 thousand people, or almost 7% of the total population.

Unfortunately, under the onslaught of extreme conditions in the first half of the 1990's (a destructive earthquake, revolutionary political, economic, and social transitions, the breakup of the USSR, a transportation and energy blockade, the transition to a market economy, a production paralysis, a fundamental structural transformation of the national economy etc.), the majority of refugees and IDPs, emigrated from Armenia during the 90's (mainly to the Russian Federation (RF)).² The main portion of those who remained in the country eventually obtained citizenship from the Republic of Armenia (RA). (According to data from the RA's State Migration Service, as of September 2013, the number of refugees from those years who obtained RA citizenship amounted to 83,642 people).

It should be noted that because of limited resources under the extreme conditions in the young Armenian state, the integration of refugees who remained in the country proceeded with great difficulty.

The most difficult integration was housing. A small number (mainly villagers) managed to solve this problem independently: through the exchange of homes with Azeri families leaving the country or the purchase of apartments/homes. But the majority were placed in public facilities: dorms, guest houses and holiday homes, hotels etc. or found temporary accommodation with relatives and acquaintances. Over time, the bulk of the housing problem was resolved one way or another (by transferring the ownership of occupied spaces, providing housing built at the expense of the Armenian government as well as several other European countries and international organizations, providing vouchers to acquire property etc.) However to this day, the problem is still not completely resolved. According to the data from the Migration Service of Armenia, more than 1,600 refugee families still continue to live in public facilities, and other families (unfortunately there is no exact data on this) live with relatives and acquaintances.

Because of the limitations of the Armenian labor market, in which supply sharply exceeded demand, and the specificity of the occupational structure of the wide array of refugees—particularly, the large number of specialists from sectors not originally in Armenia—their integration into the labor force was extremely difficult. In rural areas, thanks to the significant number of refugee families who ended up there through the purchases or exchanges of property and who also acquired land, this issue was somehow or other resolved over time (even former city dwellers retrained on farm work with

¹ Migration and Human Development: Opportunities and Challenges. Armenia, 2009. National Report 2009, UNDP, Yerevan, 2010, p. 37

² Ibid

varying success). In the cities, where the main sector for the working population was manufacturing—which essentially ceased to function—refugees were at best forced to be satisfied with low-paying work outside of their specialty areas.

Issues related to medical services were resolved relatively quickly and easily. Like all the country's citizens, all refugees have been enrolled with the appropriate health care facilities according to their place of residence. The issue of school education for children was resolved through this same principle. With regards to special education, which is mainly private, refugee families were also granted equal rights with citizens. However, because of limited economic opportunities, the majority of them—as with other poor groups of the population who make up a significant part of Armenian society—have not always had the opportunity to exercise these rights.

As far as obtaining citizenship is concerned, refugees have had practically no problems in this regard.

The Karabakh conflict also led to the emergence of the IDP phenomenon. During 1992-1994, various estimates of 70-110 thousand people³ were either officially relocated or independently relocated themselves to the central region of Armenia due to the frequent shelling of settlements and farmland near the border with Azerbaijan. After the truce was signed (in 1994), a large number returned to their settlements. As for the rest, some remained as permanent residents in the relocation settlements, and some, under the weight of insurmountable social-economic problems, fled the country, joining the massive emigration streams from those years.

The second major factor in the forced resettlement of the Armenian population (internally as well as externally) was the catastrophic Spitak earthquake in 1988, which overnight left almost a third of the country in ruins.

In 1989-1990, approximately 200 thousand residents from destroyed settlements in the disaster zone (the majority women and children), were either officially evacuated or independently relocated themselves beyond Armenian borders. The vast majority found refuge in republics in the European part of the USSR and the rest, in several European countries. Most of them (approximately 150 thousand people) returned before or after the breakup of the USSR. Others, settling permanently and initiating emigration for members for their families, essentially became one of the factors of the emergence of a massive emigration outflow of Armenia's population from 1992-1994.⁴

The number of IDPs from the earthquake zone was very large: 400-450 thousand people. As is the case with external IDPs, the majority returned to their settlements at the time of the breakup of the USSR and the subsequent almost total suspension of post-disaster recovery activities. Others, however, convinced of the groundlessness of government officials' assurances that they would quickly complete this work, stayed living in the immediate whereabouts or permanently emigrated from the country.⁵

Thus, we can say that there are currently no IDPs in Armenia.

During subsequent years in Armenia, refugee and IDP processes stopped being widespread.

This is more than eloquently proven in Table 1, with data from the State Migration Service of the Ministry of Territorial Administration of the RA.

³ See "Program for the Post-Conflict Rehabilitation of Bordering Territories in the RA." Department of Migration and Refugees, Government of the RA, Yerevan, 2000.

⁴ Migration and Human Development: Opportunities and Challenges. Armenia, 2009. National Report 2009, UNDP, Yerevan, 2010, p. 38

⁵ Ibid p. 43.

Table 1, Number of Foreign Nationals who Applied for Asylum in the Republic of Armenia in 1999-2004 ⁶

Year	Applied	Received	Did Not Receive
1999	23	5	18
2000	9	3	6
2001	10	2	8
2002	8	1	7
2003	82	63	19
2004	162	146	16
Total	294	220	74

According to this data for a six year period from 1999-2004, an average of 49 people applied for asylum annually. And this is only thanks to a more than tenfold increase in the number of applicants in 2003 and another almost twofold increase in 2004.

We should note that such a substantive and consistent increase in the numbers of applicants for asylum was entirely due to the deployment of International Coalition troops to Iraq, due to warfare and its direct consequences.

It was in 2003, i.e. the year of the start of the invasion into Iraq, that the first members of the Armenian community from Iraq, who had fled the country because of intensely aggravated interfaith and interethnic relations in the country, appeared in Armenia.

The fact that the dynamics of the above phenomenon directly relate to processes of growth and change in the political situation in the Middle East is clearly illustrated by the data in Table 2.

⁶ http://www.smsmta.am/?menu_id=61

Table 2. Number of Foreign Nationals who Applied for Asylum in the Republic of Armenia in 2005-2013. ⁷

Country of Citizenship	Total		By Year																	
			2005		2006		2007		2008		2009		2010		2011		2012		2013	
	Applied	Received	Applied	Received	Applied	Received	Applied	Received	Applied	Received	Applied	Received	Applied	Received	Applied	Received	Applied	Received	Applied	Received
Azerbaijan	24	15	1	1	3	1	1					18	12	1	1					
Turkey	19	5	2	2	3	1			3	2			7		1		3			
Israel	69	4			69	4														
Iran	98	25	9	1	7	1	14	3	11	7	11	6	12		16	4	14		4	3
Iraq	901	869	141	122	275	275	271	271	63	63	48	48	15	13	38	37	35	21	15	19
Lebanon	284	15			279	15			1						1		3			
Cote D'Ivoire	17	7									1	1	4		7	6	5			
Syria	761	504			7								4		6	6	496	155	248	343
Georgia	138	7	4						125	7	5		3				1			
Other Countries	56	2	6	1	7	0	5	0	4	0	2	1	5	0	3	0	22	0	2	0
Total	2367	1453	163	127	650	297	291	274	207	79	67	56	68	25	73	54	579	176	235	328

⁷ http://www.smsmta.am/?menu_id=61

Thus from 2005-2013, more than 2/3 of the total number of applicants for asylum in the Republic of Armenia were comprised almost entirely of members of the Armenian diaspora over different time periods from two Middle Eastern countries, Iraq and Syria, which are the hot spots of the region.

In 2005-2009, that is to say in the post-conflict years during an extremely aggravated internal situation in Iraq, Iraqis accounted for nearly 58% of the total number of applicants for asylum in Armenia. It is important to note that this proportion would be much higher were it not for the 279 refugees from the so-called second Lebanese war of 2006 and 127 refugees from the Georgian-Russian war of 2008, the majority of whom did not wait for an answer to their requests for asylum and returned to their own countries due to quick resolutions of the crisis situations. (Both groups were comprised mainly of members of the Armenian diaspora from Lebanon and Georgia),

And as one would expect for the period from 2010-2013, the overwhelming majority (more than 72%) of refugees are members of the Armenian diaspora from Syria, which will undoubtedly continue to be the most tense spot in the entire Middle Eastern region during the near future.