

Rights groups to Blinken: Don't abandon Armenian hostages in Azerbaijan

A day after a limited prisoner exchange between Armenia and Azerbaijan took place, a coalition of human rights organizations is urging the United States not to abandon Azerbaijan's remaining Armenian hostages.

In a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Christian Solidarity International (CSI), Genocide Watch, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, the Armenian National Committee of America, and others, pointed out that **dozens more Armenians are still being held by Baku.**

These include eight current and former members of the elected government of the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh) who were kidnapped during Azerbaijan's attack on Nagorno Karabakh in September, during which the entire Armenian population of the region was expelled.

On December 13, Azerbaijan released 32 Armenian soldiers. In exchange, Armenia released two Azerbaijani soldiers who had been detained after infiltrating sovereign Armenian territory and killing an Armenian civilian.

Cruelly, Vicken Euljekian, a Lebanese-Armenian civilian who was kidnapped by Azerbaijani forces in Nagorno Karabakh in November 2020, was not released, although his name had been included in the list of prisoners to be released published in Azerbaijani media last week.

"We urge you to publicly call for the release of all Armenians being held hostage by Azerbaijan," the organizations said to Blinken. "This call should be part of a larger program to hold Azerbaijan accountable for its aggression and ethnic cleansing, and ensure the safe return of the people of Nagorno Karabakh to their homeland."

The letter points out that all of the 32 people released yesterday were soldiers who were brazenly kidnapped by Azerbaijan *after* Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to a ceasefire ending their war on November 9, 2020.

And it takes issue with the State Department's assessment that Baku's prisoner release is "an important confidence building measure." Rewarding Azerbaijan for releasing people it has kidnapped, the letter warns, only encourages Azerbaijan to commit further violations of international law.

Baku is believed to be holding up to 100 Armenian hostages in addition to those released. These include – apart from the eight current and former government members - seven civilians who were kidnapped from Nagorno Karabakh during the 2020 war and during Azerbaijan's nine-month blockade of the region.

The letter includes a list of 20 Armenians known to be held hostage by Baku.