

Nagorno-Karabakh: Azerbaijan arrests former Karabakh leader



Azerbaijan's state border service released this image on Wednesday showing Ruben Vardanyan being detained

By Marita Moloney

BBC News

Azerbaijan has arrested a former leader of Nagorno-Karabakh as he tried to leave the enclave for Armenia, officials say.

Ruben Vardanyan, a businessman who headed the separatist government from November 2022 until February, was among thousands trying to leave.

Around 50,000 ethnic Armenians have now fled Nagorno-Karabakh, which was seized by Azerbaijan last week.

Mr Vardanyan's wife appealed for support to ensure his safe release.

"Ruben has stood with the Arsakh people during the 10-month blockade and has suffered with them in their struggle for survival," said Veronika Zonabend.

Azerbaijan's border service said he had been taken to the capital, Baku, and handed over to other state agencies.

As they crossed the border on Tuesday, thousands of ethnic Armenians were subject to rigorous checks from Azerbaijani border control.

Azerbaijani authorities claimed to be looking for "war crimes" suspects, and one government source told Agence France Presse news agency that the country intended to apply an "amnesty to Armenian fighters who laid down their arms in Karabakh".

"But those who committed war crimes during the Karabakh wars must be handed over to us," they said.

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Nagorno-Karabakh is recognised as part of Azerbaijan and had been controlled by ethnic Armenians for three decades.

Fears of fresh violence came when Azerbaijan mounted an effective blockade of a vital route into the enclave in December 2022.

On 20 September, a ceasefire brought 24 hours of fighting to an end. Azerbaijan and the Karabakh authorities have started talks about the integration of the enclave into Azerbaijan.

But many of the region's 120,000 ethnic Armenians fear they have no future in Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia's prime minister said "ethnic cleansing" had started in the region.

Karabakh authorities said at least 200 people had died in last week's fighting, while Azerbaijan said on Wednesday that 192 of its soldiers had been killed.

Traffic jams have lined the road out of Karabakh towards Armenia for days and a BBC team saw families crammed into cars, boots overflowing and roof-racks piled high with belongings.



Refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh ride in a truck to the border village of Kornidzor in Armenia

Western governments have been pressing Azerbaijan to allow international observers into Karabakh to monitor its treatment of the local population.

Germany became the latest country to join these calls on Tuesday, with Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock calling for "transparency".

"It would be a sign of confidence that Azerbaijan is serious about its commitments to the security and well-being of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh if it allows international observers," she said on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Also on Tuesday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged Azerbaijan's President, Ilham Aliyev, to provide "unconditional protections and freedom of movement for civilians". He also called for "unhindered humanitarian access to Nagorno-Karabakh".

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres also urged both sides to respect human rights.

The image is a screenshot of a web browser displaying a BBC News article. The browser's address bar shows the URL [bbc.com/news/world-europe-66934776](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66934776). The page features the BBC logo and navigation menus for Home, News, Sport, Reel, Worklife, Travel, and Future. The main headline is "Nagorno-Karabakh: Azerbaijan arrests former Karabakh leader", dated 27 September, with a sub-label "Nagorno-Karabakh conflict". Below the headline is a photograph of three men standing outdoors; the man in the center is wearing a dark jacket and a beard, flanked by two men in military uniforms. A "DSX" logo is visible in the top left corner of the photo. To the right of the article is a "Top Stories" section with three items: "LIVE Biden confirms Israel visit as Iran warns against Gaza offensive", "Police shoot dead Brussels attacker who killed Swedes", and "Belt and Road: Is China's trillion-dollar gamble worth it?". The Windows taskbar at the bottom shows the date and time as 15:00 on 17.10.2023.