**The Refugee Issue in Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict**

**(Background paper)**

Ethnic cleansing was the prime cause of the influx of refugees and displaced persons who first came to Armenia over two decades ago. The first groups of refugees from Azerbaijan arrived in Armenia in March 1988, after the notorious anti-Armenian mass killings and pogroms in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait and forced displacement and deportation of Karabakh Armenians from their ancestral lands. These refugees saved by a miracle have been the first refugees in the former Soviet Union. They could not even conceive that the Sumgait pogroms were only the beginning of ethnic cleansing in Azerbaijan which would be followed by similar events in Ganja, Baku and other parts of Azerbaijan, and would grow into the direct aggression of Azerbaijan against Nagorno Karabakh in 1991 accompanied by the military operations against the bordering areas of Armenia.

Together with refugees, Armenia faced another problem – that of the forcefully displaced persons, which includes the population that was displaced after the occupation of Armenia’s Artsvashen region and Azerbaijan’s devastating shelling of peaceful Armenian villages and towns along the border between the two countries.

Taking into account Armenia's present population, the total number of refugees and displaced persons in Armenia makes a frightening percentage: 10% of the country’s total population, the highest index among the CIS countries.

From the very beginning of the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiation process, Azerbaijan has chosen a position according to which the basic condition of the political settlement of the conflict is the forcible return of refugees to the territories where they formerly lived. In this connection Azerbaijan continuously presents figures about the existence of over a million of internally displaced persons and refugees of Azerbaijani nationality. In general, exaggerated or incorrect figures are part of the routine Azerbaijani propaganda at international forums and are always cited by Azerbaijan. The logic is simple: no one will take the time and effort to check them. Whereas Azerbaijan’s continuous falsification of numbers serves the sole political purpose: to mislead the international community and by abusing the IDP and refugee problems restore Azerbaijan’s military control over certain territories lost as a result of Azerbaijan’s own aggression.

In this policy of Azerbaijan, the smaller number of Armenian refugees is presented as a matter of inferior interest. Thus, their figures are rarely mentioned and the prospect for their return is very unrealistic because the continuous anti-Armenian chauvinistic hysteria in Azerbaijan would put their lives in grave danger. We all know what happened in Budapest and we know that the same will happen to other Armenians in Azerbaijan should they ever decide to leave under the mercy of the Azerbaijani authorities.