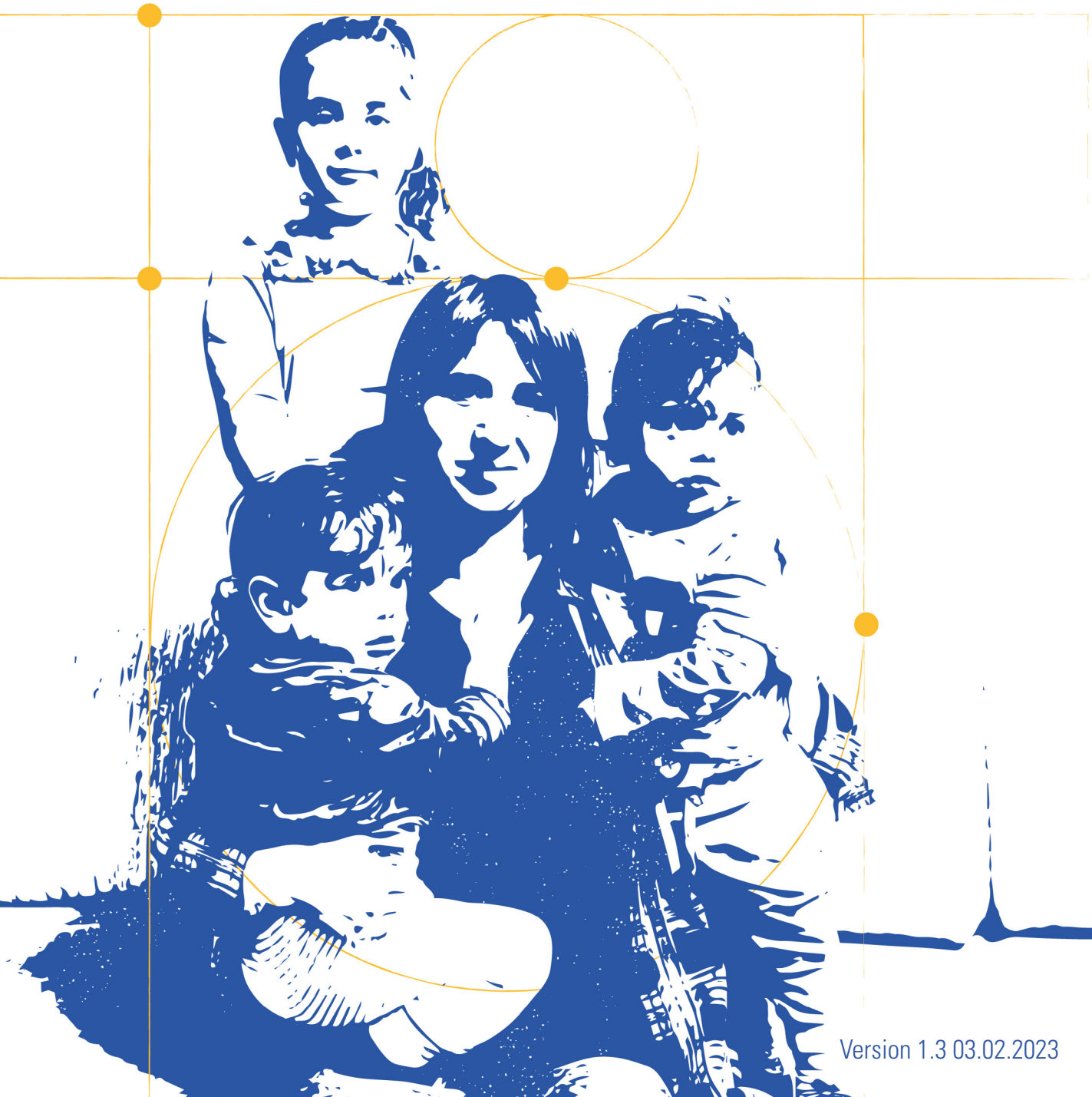


THE ZOVIGHIAN  
PARTNERSHIP

# MOTHERS UNDER SIEGE IN ARTSAKH CALL OUT GENOCIDE AND DEFY BLOCKADE OF 120,000 ARMENIANS

HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY BRIEF  
FEBRUARY 2023



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Illustration of photo by Siranush Sargasyan of Mariam Abrahamyan with her children in Stepanakert on the 30<sup>th</sup> day of the blockade of Artsakh.

# Opening letter

February 02, 2023

Dear friends,

Today is already the 53<sup>rd</sup> day since the start of the blockade in Artsakh / Nagorno-Karabakh.

It appears that 120,000 people under siege and starving is still insufficient for effective global action. For many, the crisis is not concerning enough. And yet, it is now that global concerted action must be taken! Otherwise, the next chapter will be very violent and and even more dangerous.

The whole Caucasus region and world will be deeply affected if the indigenous Armenian Christians of Artsakh are not protected before it is too late. The same way you cannot bring back time when there are delays to humanitarian action, you cannot reverse death by ethnic cleansing.

Genocide is what mothers of young children fear today as they see no end to this blockade. Starvation and malnourishment are no longer up-and-coming concerns; they are the reality of a calculated siege that is being legitimized by [Azerbaijani government policy](#) and inaction by the international community. These mothers cannot afford our words and letters of appeal anymore. Their children need food, medicine, heating, schools, and a guaranteed right to life with dignity and security.

This first emergency humanitarian briefing by The Zovighian Partnership (ZP) Public Office is written in the words of these mothers. It expands the arguments presented in a call to activate United Nations Security Council Resolution no. 1325 that my colleague, [Siranush Sargsyan](#), and I [published in Newsweek](#) last week. And its tone, its urgency, and its moral imperatives build upon my statement at the [IRF Summit 2023](#) in Washington D.C. this week.

I hope this is the first and last humanitarian briefing the [ZP Public Office](#) shares with you. But at this rate, it might be far from our last.

With my deepest respects,



Lynn Zovighian  
Co-founder & Managing Partner  
The Zovighian Partnership  
On behalf of ZP Public Office

 [@lynnzovighian](#)

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## Background information

The sole road, on the Lachin Corridor, connecting Artsakh / Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia and the outside world, has been blocked by Azerbaijani state-sponsored actors since December 12, 2022, isolating [120,000 indigenous Armenians](#).

The human consequences have become catastrophic as the blockade continues to [cut off access to goods and services](#) that used to flow regularly and freely. Artsakh / Nagorno-Karabakh is not self-sufficient, and as such, the people are experiencing a rapid depletion of food, medicine, and essential supplies. Since the start of the blockade up to the date of this briefing, more than [20,800 tons of vital goods](#), including food and medicine have been denied entry into the area.

Since the start of the humanitarian crisis, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been the [sole international humanitarian agency](#) granted passage through the blockade. The ICRC has only sometimes been able to facilitate the transfer of goods, mainly for extremely vulnerable community members, such as young children, the elderly, and medical patients. This is a meager amount relative to the 400 tons delivered daily prior to the blockade. There are [30,000 children, 20,000 elderly, and 9,000 people with disabilities in Artsakh](#). The Artsakh government has had to launch a [food coupon system](#) for families to have some basic food equitably distributed.

From the date of this briefing, six children are currently in [neonatal and intensive care units](#). 12 adults are in intensive care, of whom four are in critical condition. [560 surgeries](#) have not been conducted, depriving patients of their right to health and basic services. So far, [58 patients](#) were able to be transferred to Yerevan with the facilitated mediation of the ICRC. [192 babies](#) have been born under the siege to date. Mental stress and trauma are reaching extreme levels.

Furthermore, the only power plant, located in the Azerbaijan-controlled Aghavno-Berdzor area, that provides electricity to Artsakh / Nagorno-Karabakh was [damaged](#) on January 9. Engineers have not been allowed to run maintenance works, resulting in electricity being rationed with at least six hour blackouts a day. Additionally, the only natural gas pipeline supplying Artsakh / Nagorno-Karabakh has been [cut off four times](#) from the date of this briefing since the start of the blockade. The sole hydropower plant supplying some electricity to the area is overusing its water reservoir capacity with shorter depletion cycles expected to come.

For humanitarian context, temperatures have reached -6 degrees Celsius since the start of the year.

With no heating, limited electricity, and significant food insecurity, [118 public schools were forced to close](#) for 13 days from January 18 to January 30. Schools can only remain open as long as energy supply allows. However, [41 kindergartens and 20 long-day educational institutions remain fully closed](#) since January 9, impacting [5,528 students](#).

## On-the-ground voices & perspectives



### LITTLE ONES BORN IN CRISIS

Sitting in her living room under candlelight in Stepanakert, 28-year-old Mariam Sargsyan cradles Sate, her now six-week-old baby.

192 babies have been born in the Artsakh / Nagorno-Karabakh since the Lachin Corridor blockade began on December 12, 2022.

“I had never thought that my first born's first days of life would be like this,” laments Sargsyan. “I was still in the maternity hospital when I first learned about the blockade.”



It's been a long and cold day in Stepanakert for Mariam Sargsyan as she tries to put her one-month-old daughter to sleep on Day 30 of the Lachin blockade.

Photo courtesy of © 2023 Siranush Sargsyan

[192 babies](#) have been born in the Artsakh / Nagorno-Karabakh since the [Lachin Corridor blockade](#) began on December 12, 2022. Of the [120,000 Armenians indigenous to the area](#), [30,000 are children](#).



[First-time mothers and mothers of young children are struggling](#) to give their little ones love and care under the significant physical and mental pressures of insecurity, uncertainty, and [genocide](#) this region knows too well.

First-time mothers and mothers of young children are struggling to give their little ones love and care under the significant physical and mental pressures of insecurity, uncertainty, and genocide this region knows too well.

“In these circumstances,” she says, “living with closed borders, we never know what the next day will bring.” She adds, “It is difficult in these times of blockade to understand how your child is growing up... It is enormously hard to follow the news because when you don't follow the news you think that tomorrow will perhaps dawn with better news.”

### NO POWER, NO LIGHT NO LIFE

On January 9, the only power plant that provides electricity to Artsakh was damaged. The plant is in the Azerbaijan-controlled Aghavno-Berdzor area. To date, engineers have been prohibited from troubleshooting and conducting maintenance works. Electricity is now being rationed with a roll-out of at least six hour blackouts a day as the government of Artsakh tries to grapple with the





multifaceted crises facing its citizens. Most residents solely rely on electricity to heat their apartments.

The [electricity and gas] disruption has left the majority of Artsakh households as well as crucial medical, social and educational institutions in Artsakh without access to heating and hot water in the severe winter conditions.



To apply further pressure, the only natural gas pipeline entering Artsakh / Nagorno-Karabakh has also been [cut off four times](#) to date since the start of the blockade. With local electricity production coming from a hydropower plant that requires tremendous use of reservoir water, blackouts are expected to increase as the reservoir capacity depletes.

Temperatures have reached lows of -6 degrees Celsius since the start of the year.

According to the [latest report](#) by the Human Rights Ombudsman of Artsakh: “The [electricity and gas] disruption has left the majority of Artsakh households as well as crucial medical, social and educational institutions in Artsakh without access to heating and hot water in the severe winter conditions.”

There are no more candles in stock at the grocery stores and supermarkets of Stepanakert. Houses, workspaces, schools, and churches are left in the dark.

“Many families do not even have candles like us, and have not prepared for this,” says Sargsyan. “I, for example, have lit the souvenir candle of my sister-in-law's wedding,” she says and laughs in quintessential Artsakhi fighting spirit.

### AN IRREFUTABLE BLOCKADE

In normal times, [20,800 tons of goods and supplies](#) would have by now crossed from Armenia into Artsakh. Since the blockade, all trade has seized, and vital supplies can no longer be found in stores. The Artsakh government has had to launch a [coupon system](#) since January 20 with an allowance of 9 coupons per citizen to equitably [distribute what little is left](#). 1 kilogram of rice, pasta, buckwheat, and sugar and 1 liter of oil is being allocated per person per month, a grim reminder for those who lived through the first war of 1994-1998. On January 24, [100 tons of emergency food aid](#) bound for Artsakh could not be delivered.

“To put it simply, you feel like a criminal who has been wrongfully convicted and imprisoned and has no chance of seeing a bright light,” says Sargsyan.



To put it simply, you feel like a criminal who has been wrongfully convicted and imprisoned and has no chance of seeing a bright light.



Mothers who feed their babies with follow-on milk are especially languishing. “It is not possible to find that milk in any way,” she explains. Some mothers have turned to social media networks, such as Facebook, to ask for help and barter for baby goods. Mothers with follow-on milk are exchanging their stock for size 2 or 3 diapers. Mothers of infants are asking for size 1 diapers as they are no longer available.

Food and diapers are being distributed to families in need, explains Ani Tovmasyan, the Head of Information and Public Relations at the Ministry of Social Development and Migration in Artsakh who is also a mother of a three-month-old. “The diapers are provided from the storage of the Ministry of Social Development.”

Mothers have started to think about how to save resources, but in these conditions, many families do not have anything, so there is nothing to save.

Mothers in villages nearby are also sharing their woes on Facebook. Families with cows are able to provide for some of their milk needs. However, medicine, baby milk formula, and diapers are completely unavailable in the rural areas. With little to no stock left on all vital goods and supplies, residents from villages have no chances against the long queues at city grocery stores by the time they arrive from the countryside.

“Mothers have started to think about how to save resources, but in these conditions, many families do not have anything, so there is nothing to save,” says 30-year-old Mariam Abrahamyan, who has three children. Her twins, Nairi and Avet, are 18 months old. “They are also aware that what they have is something that other mothers do not have at all. Many mothers are sharing the last bits of food they have.”



Mariam Abrahamyan holds her 18-month-old twins and five-year-old daughter tight at her father's house in Stepanakert on Day 30 of the Lachin blockade. Photo courtesy of © 2023 Siranush Sargsyan

Newborns and young children are at severe risk of malnourishment, and even starvation, if international emergency aid is not activated soon.

These mothers are birthing a [new community of solidarity](#). Mothers who do not know each other are asking for and giving help however they can. Some mothers are breastfeeding the little children of mothers who can no longer breastfeed.

Newborns and young children are at severe risk of malnourishment, and soon, starvation if international emergency aid is not activated soon.

On January 9, mothers in Stepanakert came together in protest when they realized that the medicine and supplies pharmacies and hospitals received from the International Red Cross Committee (ICRC) on a January 6 facilitated transfer would not be enough for most of their children.

“Until now, we have participated in all the gatherings that were organized to make our voices heard. However, this is the first one that we organized,” says Abrahamyan.

Resourceless and helpless, mothers are no longer able to be problem-solvers for their families. “It seems like every day a new problem is added,” Abrahamyan explains.





God forbid something happens to my child,



Six children are in [neonatal and intensive care units](#).

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), they have transported 48 patients to Armenia, including one publicly communicated case of a 4-month-old baby with her parents.

“God forbid something happens to my child,” says Abrahamyan. The anxiety is extreme, she explains, because she knows this could have been her child and she could one day be a mother wondering if her child will live.

“Despite standing ready to address urgent humanitarian needs, the ICRC’s resources may still be reasonably limited,” says Zara Amatuni, the Communications and Prevention Manager at the ICRC Delegation in Armenia.

### THE PRECURSOR OF A GENOCIDE?

Families in Artsakh are feeling terrorized. Many are wondering if making life unlivable is meant to force impossible terms and conditions to [drive out the indigenous Armenian Christian population](#).

“We got married 44 days after the [2020] war, and at that time, we were thinking of doing everything to get back on our feet,” shares Marta Kostandyan, a 24-year-old mother of five-month-old Sona. “We started a family and had a child, but Azerbaijan does not allow us to live peacefully.”



Families in Artsakh are feeling terrorized. Many are wondering if making life unlivable is meant to force impossible terms and conditions to drive out the indigenous Armenian Christian population.



Marta Kostandyan cradles her five-month-old daughter in Stepanakert. Photo courtesy of © 2023 Sona Ohanjanyan



Artsakh is under the threat of genocide today, but we, Armenians, hope in any case that the international community will take concrete steps to unblock Artsakh and give us status.



“Artsakh is under the threat of genocide today, but we, Armenians, hope in any case that the international community will take concrete steps to unblock Artsakh and give us status. And our children, like other children of the world, will be able to rejoice in the miracle of the new year,” she explains.

“I do not see [a future here],” confesses Abrahamyan. But Artsakhi mothers have a legacy reputation of being strong and expressive. Their deep connection with their homeland is historic and multi-generational.

“But I also do not see a future elsewhere. After the war [of 2020], we had the opportunity to move, but that is why we stayed. I do not know if it is called love for the motherland or something else, but I cannot imagine myself living anywhere else,” she says.

“Most likely, we will live together with the past of our parents,” explains Sargsyan. “But that’s okay, we will endure if that is the price of keeping the homeland.”

“When you have something that is still yours, you want to keep it with all your efforts, you want to protect it, you want to cherish it,” she says. “And when I was not a parent, I thought that maybe when I am a mother, I will think differently. But now, even when my one-month-old daughter is in my arms, I know that probably it will be difficult [to leave].”

It is now 53 days since the start of the blockade.

“There is much to say. In our reality, there are very complicated, unbearable facts that you never thought you would face,” adds Sargsyan. “But I want all of us to be filled with strength and hope. Let’s hope that our life of a month ago does not become a dream for us.”

Sargsyan’s living room is getting darker as night takes over. These mothers know all too well that this crisis, with its growing markers of a possible genocide, must not be kept in the dark.



Most likely, we will live together with the past of our parents. But that’s okay, we will endure if that is the price of keeping the homeland.



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## Methodology

This emergency humanitarian briefing brings together the diverse views and perspectives of four young and / or first-time mothers in Stepanakert, Artsakh / Nagorno-Karabakh as they experience the human consequences of the Lachin Corridor blockade. These voices were documented during face-to-face and over the phone interviews on January 10, 2023 on the 30<sup>th</sup> day of the blockade. A literature review of verified and grounded grassroots, local, and international investigative reporting was also consulted to bring further geopolitical and humanitarian context. Community and journalistic accounts from the ground since the start of the blockade on December 12, 2022 were also mapped and integrated.

To honor high participatory and community-centered self-determination research design, all raw data was collected using consent-based recording and careful notetaking, transcribing, and translating protocols in the English and Armenian.

The insights and analysis presented in this briefing examine the lived experiences of Artsakhi mothers, mindful of the urgencies, sensitivities, and extreme need for deep listening and deep collaboration at this time for Artsakh and its people.

## About Siranush Sargsyan

 [@SiranushSargsy1](https://twitter.com/SiranushSargsy1)

Siranush Sargsyan is an independent journalist based in Stepanakert, Artsakh / Nagorno-Karabakh covering human rights and politics in conflict and post-conflict environments. Siranush has published in several global and regional publications, including [Newsweek](#), [IWPR](#), and [The Armenian Weekly](#). Reporting from the ground since the commencement of the blockade on December 12, 2022, Siranush has been interviewed and cited in global outlets including [CNN](#), [Le Figaro](#), and [El Periódico de España](#). Her Twitter includes daily updates on the needs and challenges facing Artstakhi citizens.

# About The Zovighian Partnership

 [@ZovPartnership](https://twitter.com/ZovPartnership)

[The Zovighian Partnership](#) is a family-owned social investment platform, established by father and daughter in 2013. Deeply invested in R&D, we are committed to delivering ethical, inclusive, and innovative design, research, and prototypes. Our methodologies apply homegrown and sustainable frameworks, models, and mechanisms.

Our team of researchers, strategists, and analysts serve communities, nation-builders, organizations, and governments. We are commissioned at every step of your journey, from early-stage ideas to already-established impact initiatives, programs, and ventures.

The R&D team of research analysts, fieldwork experts, and data scientists are committed to building information power with integrity. All commissioned research is scientific with customized deep-listening methodologies that safeguard strong participation and self-determination, all to deliver meaningful and ethical data.

## Our Public Office

Our venture and the family re-invest our financial, political, and intellectual capital into [The Zovighian Partnership Public Office](#), our growing peace-building impact portfolio for communities and cities in crisis.

We are committed to delivering significant resources to bringing grounded methodology, sound governance, and rigorous strategic thinking to our Public Office clients. We hold ourselves accountable to giving voice to the diversity of views that are central to long-term and sustainable peace and socio-economic enablement.

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