

# REFLECTING ON YEARS OF HUMANITARIAN ENGAGEMENT IN AZERBAIJAN



The closure of the International Committee of the Red Cross's (ICRC) delegation in Azerbaijan marks a moment of transition and reflection. For over 30 years, the ICRC has been part of the country's humanitarian landscape, addressing the evolving needs of people affected by conflict while prioritizing human dignity and long-term resilience.

We are not only at the closure of institutional presence, but at the culmination of decades of learning, adaptation and engagement in complex and sensitive environments. The ICRC's commitment to humanitarian principles has guided its work through periods of emergency and recovery, and its legacy remains rooted in the trust built with communities, authorities and local partners.

As the organization concludes its chapter in Azerbaijan, it does so with respect for the past and confidence in the capacities that have grown stronger over time. The relationships, systems and shared experiences forged throughout these years will continue to shape humanitarian efforts long into the future.

## FOREWORD

As we close the ICRC's delegation in Azerbaijan after more than three decades of humanitarian work, I would like to reflect on some of the key milestones and lasting contributions of our presence in the country.

Our operations evolved in step with the changing needs and realities on the ground. In the early years, we responded to urgent humanitarian consequences of the conflict with life-saving assistance, delivering food and other supplies to internally displaced people, supporting medical facilities and orthopaedic centres and helping people in need. However, much of our impact lies in the quieter, long-term work that followed.

Over time, the ICRC focused on strengthening national capacities and building sustainable solutions in partnership with local entities. We supported the development of physical rehabilitation services, helped improve access to safe drinking water in remote areas and contributed to the modernization of primary-health-care infrastructure in conflict-affected areas. We also invested in economic security programmes, enabling vulnerable families to build livelihoods and regain self-reliance.

One of the most profound aspects of our engagement has been our contribution to the clarification of what happened to missing people. Working closely with the State Commission on Prisoners of War, Hostages and Missing Persons and the families of the missing, we facilitated processes for data collection, family accompaniment and collection of biological reference samples, laying the groundwork for future identification efforts.

Since 1992, we have visited hundreds of detainees to assess the conditions of detention and their treatment, and to ensure that they could restore or maintain contact with their families. The observations and recommendations related to the visits were shared with the detaining authorities.

We also supported the integration of international humanitarian law (IHL) into military training and academic curricula and worked closely with authorities to promote legal frameworks aligned with humanitarian norms.

As we conclude this chapter, we carry with us the trust, understanding and cooperation that have shaped our presence in Azerbaijan over the past three decades. None of this would have been possible without the trust placed in us by Azerbaijani authorities and communities, our strong cooperation with the Azerbaijan Red Crescent Society and the professionalism of our partners and staff.

Thank you for walking this journey with us.

**DRAGANA KOJIC**  
**HEAD OF DELEGATION IN AZERBAIJAN**

## DECADES OF WAITING: SUPPORTING FAMILIES OF THE MISSING IN AZERBAIJAN



For over 30 years, families in Azerbaijan have lived with the uncertainty of not knowing what happened to their loved ones who went missing during the Karabakh conflict. Since the 1990s, the ICRC has worked alongside national authorities and communities to address this issue. To date, we have submitted eight lists of missing persons to the State Commission on Prisoners of War, Hostages and Missing Persons (CEPOD), with approximately 4,000 cases registered. What began as an urgent tracing operation has

evolved into a comprehensive approach, involving legal, forensic and psychosocial support. The ICRC's tracing efforts began with compiling names from family testimonies and led to the creation of a consolidated list of missing persons, facilitating cooperation with Azerbaijani authorities. The most recent list was submitted in April 2024. Additionally, our Accompaniment Programme, launched in 2012, provided crucial psychosocial care and administrative support to families. This programme has reached over 3,000 families through home visits and peer group sessions.

Families of the missing have the right to know what happened to their loved ones. With this in mind, we focused on helping CEPOD and other agencies build their forensic capabilities to identify human remains. Between 2008 and 2024, we collected ante-mortem data from families of 3,879 missing people, and by 2022 over 10,800 biological reference samples had been gathered from 3,492 families. While the state laboratory did DNA profiling to identify human remains, the ICRC conducted numerous forensic training workshops for over 300 professionals from different agencies. Field visits and support for exhumations also played a key role in the recovery of human remains in accordance with best international practices. These integrated efforts facilitated the identification of the remains of hundreds of missing people.

## PROMOTION AND INTEGRATION OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

Working in partnership with key governmental institutions, we have contributed to building a sustainable framework for the understanding and application of international humanitarian law across military, legal, academic and public domains.

In partnership with the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, tens of thousands of personnel have received comprehensive training on IHL and international standards of policing. These efforts were instrumental in supporting the institutionalization of IHL through its integration into military doctrine, training curricula and law enforcement practices. Azerbaijani servicemen and cadets participated in regular IHL briefings and instructional sessions, reflecting a shared commitment to embedding humanitarian norms into the operational and strategic levels of the armed forces.



In partnership with the Ombudsman's Office, a series of seminars was organized to strengthen the national implementation of IHL. These capacity-building events brought together up to 300 professionals from governmental institutions, fostering a deeper understanding of IHL principles and promoting their effective application at the national level.

A key milestone in this partnership was Azerbaijan's successful hosting of the 17th Senior Workshop on International Rules governing Military Operations (SWIRMO) in Baku, which brought together nearly 100 high-ranking military officials. The event underscored Azerbaijan's active role in advancing IHL dialogue and its application in contemporary military contexts.

Our engagement with the academic and legal sectors was also developed in close coordination with national institutions. Over 5,000 students, university professors and legal professionals joined IHL-focused programmes, including guest lectures, moot court competitions and study visits. More than 1,500 legal professionals (judges, prosecutors and defence lawyers) participated in seminars and presentations designed to strengthen the application of IHL within judicial practice and legal education.

Furthermore, in partnership with media organizations, the ICRC conducted awareness-raising sessions for journalists on its mandate and core IHL principles. These efforts contributed to a broader understanding of humanitarian law within public discourse and media reporting.

These achievements reflect our close cooperation with Azerbaijani institutions, and a shared dedication to upholding the principles of IHL and their practical implementation across all sectors of society.

## **ENSURING HUMANITARIAN STANDARDS IN DETENTION SETTINGS**

Since the onset of the international armed conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1992, the ICRC has played a vital humanitarian role in detention-related activities for people protected under the Geneva Conventions. Acting in our neutral and independent capacity, we facilitated the repatriation and transfer of prisoners of war (PoWs), civilian internees and other detainees, ensuring humane treatment and family contact throughout the process. From 1992 onwards, we supported the exchange of information between the parties, enabling the release and exchange of hundreds of individuals. The ICRC's role as a neutral intermediary was widely acknowledged and appreciated by the sides.

A defining component of our work in detention places was the pioneering tuberculosis (TB) control programme (1995–2010) within the penitentiary system, in partnership with the Ministry of Justice. This programme contributed to a drastic decrease (105 times) in TB mortality compared to 1995.

What began as an experimental initiative to combat TB in a prison hospital evolved into a nationally recognized model of disease control. We introduced the World Health Organization (WHO)-recommended Directly Observed Treatment, Short-course (DOTS) strategy and worked

closely with national authorities to ensure its full implementation. In 1998, following years of engagement, a landmark tripartite agreement was signed between the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Health and the ICRC, solidifying the national commitment to TB control. This resulted in the transformation of Penal Colony No. 3 into a dedicated TB treatment facility, enabling a fourfold increase in the number of patients treated and significantly enhancing diagnostic and laboratory capacities. By the time the programme was formally handed over to the authorities in 2010, more than 2,700 prisoners had received treatment. The ICRC continued to provide medical supplies along with critical support in monitoring and training for several years.

In parallel, the ICRC continuously sought access to people detained in relation to the conflict, carrying out 869 repeated visits to places of detention to assess living conditions and treatment of detainees, their access to health care and their ability to maintain contact with their families. At the same time we engaged in bilateral and confidential dialogue with detaining authorities to address humanitarian concerns in accordance with our standard working procedures. While the ICRC's delegation in Baku prepares to close, our commitment to visiting people protected under IHL and fulfilling our mandate in this area remains firm.



Beyond conflict-related detention, we expanded our humanitarian activities to all people deprived of their liberty in Azerbaijan, formalized by a Detention Visit Agreement signed in 2000. Working closely with national authorities such as the State Security Service, ministries of justice, internal affairs, defence and health among others, we monitored and supported vulnerable detainees. Over the years, the ICRC has conducted 1,376 repeated visits to places of detention, following up individually on 2,261 detainees. We adapted our approach to balance systemic and individual follow-up, prioritizing humanitarian needs and promoting detainees' access to basic services as per international standards.

Another significant component of the ICRC's health-related activities for detainees was the mental health and psychosocial support pilot project (2018–2022), developed in partnership with the Central Medical Authority to strengthen capacity of prison staff in addressing mental health concerns among detainees. This initiative marked a meaningful contribution to sustainable mental health care in detention settings.

Following the Azerbaijani authorities' notification to end the Headquarters Agreement, the ICRC concluded its non-conflict detention-related activities.

## **STRENGTHENING LOCAL HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE: PARTNERING WITH THE AZERBAIJAN RED CRESCENT SOCIETY**

Since 1992, we have maintained a strong partnership with the Azerbaijan Red Crescent Society (AzRCS) and worked closely to deliver much-needed humanitarian assistance.



This partnership was crucial in the distribution of humanitarian aid, supporting displaced people and ensuring access to first aid and medical care from 1992 till now. Since the 2000s, the partnership expanded to include programmes like mine risk awareness, access to education, water and hygiene, psychosocial support for conflict-affected individuals and economic assistance for vulnerable communities, alongside AzRCS volunteers advocating for humanitarian principles.

Over the years, we also contributed to the capacity development of AzRCS staff members, volunteers and some of its field offices to ensure continuity of humanitarian services for the communities. The ICRC's extensive support towards the development of the AzRCS emergency preparedness capacities enabled it to establish and maintain Emergency Mobile Volunteer Teams (EMVTs) – multi-sectoral groups of trained volunteers at the district level that are the first responders in the field.

In partnership with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), we worked from 2021 to 2024 on the institutional development of the AzRCS, focusing on key systems to enhance its performance.

## **SUPPORTING PEOPLE LIVING IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED AREAS**

### **PROVIDING MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT**

Recognizing the invisible wounds left by conflict, the ICRC launched its mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programme in the early 2000s. The initial focus was to support families of missing people, with psychological assessments, peer support networks and counselling to help them cope with prolonged uncertainty and grief. As needs diversified, the programme evolved to include conflict-affected communities near the line of contact, mine survivors and their families, repatriated individuals (particularly women and children) from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, and people deprived of their liberty.

Over time, MHPSS activities expanded beyond direct service delivery to include large-scale capacity-building and institutional support. Community-based mental health initiatives promoted resilience through awareness-raising sessions, social enrichment events and psychosocial support for school-aged children using tools like *The Book About Me*. At the same time, targeted psychological care, including individual therapy, group support and referrals for clinical services, was provided to those with acute or complex needs.

Between 2012 and 2017 alone, nearly 7,000 support group sessions and over 1,000 home visits were conducted for families of the missing. From 2018 onwards, more than 300 professionals were trained, including 151 specialists focused on supporting repatriated children and their



families. More than 100 community groups (teachers, health workers, volunteers) were engaged in long-term psychosocial initiatives.

The impact of the MHPSS programme is reflected in both numbers and narratives. Over 15,000 detainees underwent mental health screenings, hundreds of people affected on the front line (including mine victims and survivors) received direct psychological support and more than 5,000 psychological sessions were conducted across the country. Importantly, the ICRC prioritized local ownership and sustainability by working closely with national partners

such as the AzRCS, Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Ministry of Science and Education (MoSE), and the State Commission on Prisoners of War, Hostages, and Missing Persons. This has ensured that MHPSS services can continue long after the ICRC's departure. From basic psychosocial support in emergencies to institutional development, our MHPSS programme leaves behind a foundation of strengthened capacity, trained professionals and a more resilient network of care across Azerbaijan.

### **PROMOTING SAFER BEHAVIOUR AND SUPPORTING SURVIVORS IN WEAPON-CONTAMINATED AREAS**

Azerbaijan remains one of the countries most heavily contaminated by landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) littered across battlefields and fortification areas, posing a serious threat to lives and livelihoods in Azerbaijan. The ICRC, in close cooperation with national partners, worked on a comprehensive response to reduce these risks and support affected communities. Our work focused on a combination of preventive action, capacity-building and survivor-centred support through mine risk education and mental health services.

Our programme dealing with weapon contamination in Azerbaijan was aimed at increasing risk awareness and supporting local authorities in their efforts to clear contaminated areas. Since the 1990s, in close cooperation with the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) and AzRCS, the ICRC actively contributed to risk awareness and safer behaviour (RASB) activities. Our partnership with ANAMA and AzRCS, which emerged from the urgent need to protect civilians in mine-affected areas during and after the conflict, laid the foundation for decades of coordinated action.

Promoting safer behaviour remained one of our core priorities during and after the hostilities, particularly in the wake of the 2016 and 2020 hostilities. The preventive measures to reduce risks for families living in front-line villages included rebuilding shelters, constructing protective walls and redesigning residential homes to minimize exposure to explosive hazards.

Through 300 trained AzRCS volunteers, we jointly reached over 100,000 individuals between 2022 and 2025 in the affected communities with life-saving information. Building on these efforts, we also trained 19 mine survivors as RASB facilitators. These individuals, who drew from their lived experiences, were integrated as volunteers within the AzRCS and conducted over 1,460 awareness-raising sessions in former front-line areas and settlements of internally displaced people. Reaching over 4,000 individuals, these sessions delivered life-saving information and practical safety guidance. In a move to ensure sustainability, these facilitators were formally transitioned into the AzRCS volunteer network by August 2024, anchoring risk education in local



communities and promoting a sense of ownership and continuity in safety outreach.

In support of national mine action initiatives, the ICRC also provided critical equipment to ANAMA to support its mine clearance efforts, including 4,500 mine warning signs, 100 large RASB billboards, personal protective equipment (PPE) for mine clearance teams and IT hardware to support operational planning and data management.

We remain confident that the systems and capacities developed over the years will support ongoing efforts to promote safety, recovery and resilience in conflict-affected areas across the country.

### **IMPROVING WATER AND HABITAT INFRASTRUCTURE**

The ICRC was systematically involved in supporting local communities with water and habitat projects in Azerbaijan since 2006. We undertook various initiatives to improve water accessibility and contributed to the repair and upgradation of essential facilities affected by conflict, helping in immediate delivery of service as well as building long-term resilience by working closely with local authorities.

From 2008 to 2022, the water and habitat team executed over 100 water-related projects, benefiting more than 50,000 individuals living in conflict-affected areas. Project implementation involved training local water agency operators and community awareness-raising initiatives on water conservation.

The activities were carried out in response to the autumn hostilities of 2020, during which we contributed 47.3 km of aluminium cables, 220 relays and 130 contactor switches to state agencies. Over 6,000 individuals benefited from restored electrical networks and repaired boreholes, providing both irrigation and drinking water.

We also introduced pilot projects, such as installing solar panels, rainwater harvesting and replacing ground canals with pipelines from boreholes to fields to promote ecofriendly and resource-saving approaches.



In 2021, the water and habitat team established a partnership with the Ministry of Science and Education under the ICRC's Access to Education programme. Around 50 projects were implemented to repair/rebuild education facilities affected by the conflict and improve water supply, sanitary and hygiene facilities, benefiting over 10,000 children.

As part of our holistic approach to supporting vulnerable communities, we also regularly donated materials, spare parts and equipment to authorities for the reinstallation of electrical networks.

Our multidisciplinary approach, incorporating innovative pilot projects and partnerships with local authorities has significantly contributed to improving water accessibility, quality and essential infrastructure in conflict-affected areas.

## **IMPROVING HEALTH SERVICES**

Our support to the health sector contributed to the resilience and well-being of communities affected by conflict.

Between 2020 and 2021, the ICRC partnered with Azerbaijan's Central Medical Authority to enhance mental health care within the penitentiary system and improve the capacity of prison medical staff to identify and address psychological issues among detainees, particularly during the intake process. An ICRC psychologist worked alongside prison officials to develop practical skills for the early detection of mental health concerns and to facilitate appropriate psychological support for inmates.

Beyond detention settings, the ICRC's health-care activities since 2016 have included providing broad-based community support. Over 6,000 individuals, including health workers, volunteers and residents in conflict-affected regions, received essential first-aid training. In partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Defense, we organized specialized war surgery training sessions for military and civilian surgeons. These sessions were conducted by international experts invited by the ICRC to strengthen surgical capacity in managing conflict-related injuries.



With the AzRCS and the Administration of the Regional Medical Divisions (TABIB), the ICRC provided additional training to emergency responders and front-line medical personnel. This included distributing over 1,000 first-aid kits and trauma care support across conflict-affected regions. The renovation of nine primary-health-care centres and providing medical equipment, besides MHPSS training, helped local systems to continue delivering quality services independently.

During COVID-19, the ICRC adapted quickly to support national pandemic response efforts, equipping AzRCS volunteers with PPE and delivering targeted training on infection prevention and control. More than 5,000 individuals received curative consultations and vaccinations in the primary-health-care centres renovated by the ICRC.

The legacy of the ICRC's health-care work, rooted in innovation, collaboration and sustained local capacity-building, will continue to benefit communities. This impact was made possible through the committed cooperation of national institutions such as the Ministry of Defense, TABIB, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Justice.

## **STRENGTHENING ECONOMIC SECURITY OF COMMUNITIES AND BUILDING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS**

Through sustainable income-generating activities in the 1990s, the ICRC contributed to building economic resilience and self-sufficiency in conflict-affected communities and transitioned from emergency aid to development-oriented programmes.

In the aftermath of the 2016 and 2020 hostilities, our economic security (EcoSec) programme focused on livelihood support, rebuilding/upgrading infrastructure, agricultural assistance and emergency relief. The ICRC implemented initiatives to help destitute or impoverished families, often those headed by women, regain their ability to earn a living. The efforts included microeconomic initiatives such as seed, fertilizer and tool distributions, livestock replenishment and vaccination, cash-for-work projects to repair and restore community infrastructure and in-kind or cash-based support for sewing machines, flour mills, oil presses, brick-making machines and irrigation pumps.



Our key achievements between 2011 and 2024 include livelihood asset support to over 13,000 individuals. During and after the hostilities in 2016 and 2020, over 12,000 individuals received large-scale cash assistance, directly benefiting affected communities and vulnerable households. The programme also funded numerous community infrastructure projects (such as repairing public showers and kindergartens and schools) benefiting approximately 10,000 people.

To support soil recovery and improve harvest, we distributed manure and fertilizer in 2016 and 2017. In 2017, we introduced saffron cultivation as an innovative, high-value, water-efficient livelihood alternative in the conflict-affected regions.

Vocational training and microeconomic support also empowered people, with around 100 individuals receiving skill development training between 2019 and 2020.

In response to COVID-19, we offered distance learning and beekeeping hotline services and continued to distribute fodder for livestock.

Through various initiatives, the EcoSec programme has positively impacted tens of thousands of people living in front-line villages and settlements, delivering sustained support to strengthen resilience and restore dignity through economic independence.

## **FACILITATING ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED AREAS**

Working in close partnership with the Ministry of Science and Education, the ICRC's Access to Education programme had a significant impact on conflict-affected communities by promoting safe learning environments, improving infrastructure and supporting the most vulnerable children and families.

As part of our efforts to promote humanitarian values in education, we partnered with the Ministry of Education to develop and introduce a supplementary textbook on IHL for secondary schools in



1995–2005. This initiative aimed to integrate IHL principles into the national curriculum, fostering values such as humanity and respect for life and human dignity among young learners. Teachers were trained to deliver these concepts in an accessible and age-appropriate manner, laying the groundwork for more comprehensive educational support in the years that followed.

Building on this foundation, between 2019 and 2024,

more than 35,000 people benefited from the construction, renovation and essential infrastructure improvements of 25 schools and six kindergartens. This ensured continuity of education and created dignified and safe spaces for learning.

As part of capacity-building initiatives, multidisciplinary training programmes were conducted for hundreds of educators and caregivers across conflict-affected districts, focusing on first aid, psychosocial support and safer behaviour practices.

From 2020 to 2023, over 10,000 individuals received financial assistance and in-kind donations to support their education. Special attention was given to vulnerable families, including children repatriated from Iraq and Syria, to ensure their reintegration into formal education systems.

The programme covered more than 400 communities, strengthening community engagement and resilience in conflict-affected areas. This holistic approach empowered local agencies to take ownership of preparedness and recovery initiatives.