

## **Over 150 Global Humanitarian, Business and Political Leaders Demand Freedom of “Armenian Prisoners”**

***Nobel Laureates, Captains of Industry, Former Heads of State and Civil Society Leaders Unite, Calling for Unconditional Release of Ethnic Armenians Illegally Held in Azerbaijan***

***Failure to release most prominent prisoners demonstrates political retribution by Baku ; Calls for sanctions against the Aliyev regime mounting in the US Congress and the European Parliament***

*Letter signed by former presidents Mary Robinson, Ernesto Zedillo, Nobel Prize Winners Leymah Gbowee and Oscar Arias, Elisha Wiesel, Chairman of the Board of the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity, entrepreneurs Richard Branson, Marc Benioff, publisher Ariana Huffington, and other global figures highlights concerns for detained leaders from Nagorno-Karabakh, including Armenian humanitarian Ruben Vardanyan.*

DECEMBER 12, 2023 – Nobel Prize laureates, business leaders, former heads of state, and humanitarians are among the more than 150 global figures who have signed a letter calling for the immediate and unconditional release of the “Armenian Prisoners,” which includes eight Armenian political prisoners, who are former leaders of Nagorno-Karabakh’s government illegally detained following Azerbaijan’s invasion and seizure of the region in September. More than a dozen other prisoners of war arrested during the conflict also remain in custody.

The collective plea echoes growing concerns over conditions and treatment of these imprisoned individuals, including prominent Armenian businessman and humanitarian, Ruben Vardanyan. Their arrest follows a campaign of ethnic cleansing by the Azerbaijani forces. While the December 7th release of 32 Armenian prisoners of war is a welcome first step, all of the others must be released. The failure of Baku to release the remaining 8 political prisoners raises deep concerns over the motives by the Aliyev regime of their continued detention.

“The human rights abuses witnessed in the wake of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict demand urgent attention and action.,” said Noubar Afeyan, another signatory as well as the co-founder of the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative. “President Aliyev chooses political retribution over justice. We believe in the inherent dignity and rights of every individual and call on the international community to join us in condemning this injustice.”

Afeyan has long collaborated on global and regional economic development and humanitarian projects with Vardanyan, who has become a symbol of the broader struggle for political freedom and human dignity in the region. His unjust imprisonment has galvanized some of the world's most respected voices to champion his cause and that of others unjustly detained.

“We call on President Aliyev to fulfill his obligations to international rules and law, ensuring those unjustly imprisoned can return safely to their families,” said Paul Polman, Vice Chair of the United Nations Global Compact and former CEO of Unilever. “All individuals in Nagorno-Karabakh have a right to experience a life of peace and security, including the freedom to move without hindrance or the looming specter of inhuman treatment. Given Azerbaijan's bid to host COP 29 in 2024, I sincerely hope the United Nations will only agree if Baku releases all these prisoners.”

Polman is one of the letter's signatories, alongside former heads of state, such as Ernesto Zedillo, former President of Mexico; Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland; Oscar Arias, former President of Costa Rica and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, and Elisha Wiesel, Chairman of the Board of the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity and Aurora Humanitarian Initiative, and son of the late Elie Wiesel, former Co-Chair of Aurora Prize for Awakening Humanity. Other prominent signatories represent a wide range of sectors, including Richard Branson, CEO of Virgin, Marc Benioff, CEO of Salesforce; Ariana Huffington, founder of Thrive and The Huffington Post; and Serj Tankian, renowned musician and lead vocalist of System of a Down.

"The unjust detention of Ruben Vardanyan and so many others being held in Baku violates their basic human rights," said Mary Robinson, Former UN High Commissioner of Human Rights. "For the government of Azerbaijan to be respected in the global community, it is critical they respect the rule of law, especially in light of the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh. They must release these detainees immediately.

Their unified plea serves as a powerful reminder that global political leaders are closely monitoring developments in Azerbaijan and calling for the release of the detainees. As asserted in the letter issued today, the detention of Armenian prisoners is a clear violation of international norms, including the Third Geneva Convention.

In recent weeks, members of the European Parliament and European Council have pursued a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the release of all illegally held detainees arising from the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh. In October, the European Parliament passed a [resolution](#) calling on Azerbaijan to release and commit to a broad amnesty for all the inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh who have been arrested since September 19, including former officials from the region. The European Parliament has also called for sanctions against the individuals in the Azerbaijani Government responsible for multiple ceasefire violations and violations of human rights in Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as investigations into the abuses committed by Azerbaijani forces that could constitute war crimes.

Similarly, Congressman Adam Schiff (D-CA) introduced a [resolution](#) calling on Azerbaijan to immediately release all prisoners of war (POWs) and civilians currently detained in the years-long attack on Nagorno-Karabakh, also known as Artsakh. The resolution also calls on President Biden to impose sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act on Azerbaijani Government officials responsible for the illegal detention, torture, and extrajudicial killing of Armenian prisoners of war, civilian detainees, hostages, political prisoners, and others detained persons.

A full list of signatories and a copy of the letter are available at: [www.FreeArmenianPrisoners.com](http://www.FreeArmenianPrisoners.com)

For questions about the letter or how to support this effort, or to request an interview, contact: [contact@freearmenianprisoners.com](mailto:contact@freearmenianprisoners.com)

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#FreeArmenianPrisoners @RubenVardanyan