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TERRORISM

ASIA, THE PACIFIC, AND NONPROLIFERATION

February 23, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of State  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

I write regarding the territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. This frozen conflict flared up with deadly repercussions last fall and U.S. leadership as a Minsk Group Co-Chair is critical to reach a lasting resolution and to meet dire humanitarian needs.

As you know, between 20,000 and 30,000 people were killed, and hundreds of thousands were displaced before the 1994 ceasefire.<sup>1</sup> Despite the ceasefire, risk of renewed fighting has remained ever present. According to a report by the International Crisis Group, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and de facto Nagorno-Karabakh authorities have reported nearly 300 incidents along the line of contact between January 2015 and September 26, 2020, resulting in some 1,700 individuals killed or wounded.<sup>2</sup> The six-week armed conflict that ignited on September 27, 2020, has led to more than 5,100 deaths, constituting the deadliest fighting in the region in nearly three decades. In addition, actions taken by both countries have only fueled tensions over the past decades. For instance, both sides have built up their arsenals with 176 heavy weaponry since 2006, deployed 70 special operations across the front line since 2015, and used 46 drones for surveillance since 2016.

While I welcome the November 9 agreement -- signed by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia -- to end the military conflict, the agreement is only the first of many steps towards restoring lasting peace and stability to the region and paving the way for reconciliation for the people of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh. The United States, as a Minsk Group Co-Chair, plays a critical role in leading diplomatic efforts to find a lasting resolution to the conflict. I was heartened to see the Co-Chairs' December 2020 visit to Baku and Yerevan, where they assessed the situation on the ground, met with government leaders, and

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<sup>1</sup> *Why Nagorno-Karabakh has Pitted Armenia and Azerbaijan for Decades*, Washington Post (Oct. 2, 2020) (online at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/nagorno-karabakh-faq-armenia-azerbaijan/2020/10/01/cd2e1aa8-0293-11eb-b92e-029676f9ebec\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/nagorno-karabakh-faq-armenia-azerbaijan/2020/10/01/cd2e1aa8-0293-11eb-b92e-029676f9ebec_story.html))

<sup>2</sup> *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer*, International Crisis Group (Dec. 2, 2021) (online at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-visual-explainer>)

consulted with United Nations and humanitarian agencies. I hope that Azerbaijan and Armenia will work in full faith with the Minsk Group Co-Chairs to resolve all remaining core substantive issues, to include the return of detainees, and to create a more positive and conducive environment for peace. In addition to participating in the Minsk Group process, we can do more as the U.S. government to meet humanitarian needs and relieve the people's suffering in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Please ensure that we are helping meet the needs of newly displaced Armenian communities.

The involvement of third country parties, through direct or indirect backing of Armenia and Azerbaijan forces in armed clashes, has only exacerbated conditions on the ground and jeopardized the chance for peace. The United States must work with European allies and partners to prevent the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from turning into a proxy war for Turkey and Russia. On a separate but related track, we must be honest, unwavering, and consistent in our commitment to democratic values, the rule of law, and human rights in our engagement worldwide, including with Turkey as a NATO ally and Russia. I urge you to continue speaking out against democratic backsliding, suppression, and egregious human rights abuses and prioritize these in your engagement with Turkish and Russian leaders.

As we both know well, there is no military solution to this territorial conflict. It is my sincere hope that the United States will help establish sustainable peace and lasting development for Nagorno-Karabakh and the wider region.

Thank you for your full engagement on this important and urgent matter.

Best Regards,



Gerald E. Connolly  
Member of Congress  
11<sup>th</sup> District, Virginia