News
Bishop Malloy

Bishop David J. Malloy of Rockford, Ill., attends a Nov. 16, 2022, session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. Bishop Malloy, the bishops' international policy chairman, is calling for a peaceful end to the months-long blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh that has left some 120,000 ethnic Armenian Christians at risk of what experts are calling "genocide by starvation." (OSV News photo/CNS file, Bob Roller)

Gina Christian

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Bishop David J. Malloy of Rockford, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace, called for a peaceful end to the months-long blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh that has left some 120,000 ethnic Armenian Christians at risk of what experts are calling "genocide by starvation."

"We continue to pray for an end to the conflict and this growing humanitarian crisis," Bishop Malloy said in a Sept. 7 statement. "The Holy Father's two apostolic visits to the South Caucasus in 2016 and his more recent appeal earlier this year for 'the serious humanitarian situation in the Lachin Corridor' reflects our strong hope for a

resolution."

For the past nine months, Azerbaijan has closed the only road leading from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh (known in Armenian by its ancient name, Artsakh), a historic Armenian enclave located in southwestern Azerbaijan and internationally recognized as part of that nation.

The blockade of the three-mile (five-kilometer) Lachin Corridor, which connects the roughly 1,970 square mile enclave to Armenia, has deprived residents of food, baby formula, oil, medication, hygienic products and fuel – even as a convoy of trucks with an estimated 400 tons of aid is stalled at the single Azerbaijani checkpoint. Attempts by the International Red Cross to deliver aid have been rebuffed.

Bishop Malloy said that Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin's visit to both Armenia and Azerbaijan in July "serves as witness to the Holy See's efforts in seeking peace.

"With the continued impasse of this conflict and the mounting consequences of this blockade, let us all be of one mind and one accord in our prayers for those suffering from this conflict – to see this impending humanitarian catastrophe averted and to see this conflict ultimately resolved through peaceful means," said Bishop Malloy.

Armenian cemetery

People visit a cemetery on the day of the Armenian nationwide mourning for those killed in a military conflict over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh in Yerevan, Armenia, Dec. 19, 2020. (OSV News photo/Vahram Baghdasaryan, Photolure via Reuters)

The bishop's comments follow a Sept. 6 emergency hearing of the bipartisan Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in Congress.

"It's now a three-alarm fire that's getting worse by the moment," said Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., who chaired the meeting and is a longstanding Catholic human rights champion.

David L. Phillips, an adjunct professor at Georgetown University and director of Columbia University's Artsakh Atrocities Project testified before the commission that

his project has collected "information on Azerbaijan's systematic effort to drive Armenians from their homeland through killings, ethnic cleansing and deportations," thereby constituting "crimes against humanity."

In 2020, Azerbaijan went to war with Armenia over the enclave in which 3,000 Azerbaijani and 4,000 Armenian soldiers were killed. The conflict had been preceded by a 1992-1994 struggle between Armenia and Azerbaijan for control of the region, which had declared its independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991. Some 30,000 were killed and more than 1 million displaced in that conflict. Russia brokered a 1994 ceasefire, and in a 2017 referendum, voters approved a new constitution and a change in name to the Republic of Artsakh (although "Nagorno Karabakh Republic" also remains an official name).

Philips said Azerbaijan's blockade of the Lachin Corridor ultimately "constitutes a second Armenian genocide," referencing the 1915-1916 slaughter and starvation of up to 1.2 million Armenians under the Ottoman Empire. He also noted Azerbaijan's refusal to comply with a February 2022 order by the International Court of Justice to ensure "unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles and cargo along the Lachin Corridor in both directions," as well as calls from "international leaders such as the U.N. Secretary General, the U.S. Secretary of State, and the President of France" to abide by the order.

Bishop Mikael A. Mouradian of the California-based Armenian Catholic Eparchy of Our Lady of Nareg told OSV News Sept. 6 that Congress "should without any delay put up a bipartisan human rights act."

The bishop said that without a law in place he feared another Armenian genocide "is inevitable if things continue like they are now."

Smith, who criticized U.S. inaction on the Azerbaijani blockade, plans to introduce a new bill, the "Nagorno-Karabakh Human Rights Act", for Congress to take action.