

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for being here, or for joining us online, as the case may be.

As Madame Savary mentioned, my name is Joel Veldkamp, and I serve as the director of advocacy for Christian Solidarity International, or CSI. CSI is a Christian human rights group. We campaign for religious freedom and human dignity worldwide. We were founded in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1977. Today we have affiliates in eight countries, but Switzerland remains the seat of our international headquarters. We are honored to represent thousands of people across Switzerland who believe in human rights and religious freedom, and who make our work possible with their support.

We are gathered today because today marks one year since Switzerland's Council of States passed Motion 24.4259, mandating the Federal Council to hold a peace forum for Nagorno Karabakh, a forum that would bring together the two parties to the Karabakh conflict: the Republic of Azerbaijan, and the representatives of the Armenian people of Nagorno Karabakh.

This uniquely Swiss peace initiative is a response to one of the great overlooked atrocities of this decade. Before October 2023, Nagorno Karabakh was home to 120,000 Armenian Christians, who governed themselves in an independent republic, the Republic of Artsakh. Armenians had been living continuously in Nagorno Karabakh for thousands of years.

In December 2022, Azerbaijan imposed a blockade on Nagorno Karabakh. Over the next nine months, Azerbaijan deliberately engineered a humanitarian crisis in the region. Supplies of fuel, medicine, and food decreased precipitously.

On September 19, 2023, when the hunger and desperation inside Nagorno Karabakh had reached a peak, Azerbaijan launched a military campaign to conquer this land and empty it of its Armenian population. This would be one of the most complete, most efficient ethnic cleansing campaigns in modern history. In the span of seven days, virtually the entire population of nearly 120,000 Armenians fled from Nagorno Karabakh into the neighboring Republic of Armenia. Nagorno Karabakh today is a land of ghosts.

The ethnic cleansing of Nagorno Karabakh in 2023 is only the latest round of violence in a conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives over the past four decades, and brought continual instability to the vital South Caucasus region.

Many countries criticized Azerbaijan's ethnic cleansing campaign at the time. Many countries have, in principle, recognized that the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh have the right to return to their homeland. The International Court of Justice ruled on 17 November 2023, in no uncertain terms, that "Azerbaijan must ensure that persons who have left Nagorno-Karabakh after 19 September 2023 and who wish to return to Nagorno-Karabakh are able to do so in a safe, unimpeded and expeditious manner."

Nevertheless, virtually no governments have acted on this principle. One month after the ethnic cleansing, Azerbaijan's president boasted that he had found a, quote, "military solution" to the Karabakh conflict. Most countries seem to be quietly hoping that he is right – that peace in the South Caucasus can be built on ethnic cleansing.

Only the parliament of Switzerland has proposed a mechanism for making the right of return happen.

This proposed mechanism is a credit to Switzerland's long tradition of peacemaking and mediation. It does not entail war or military action or economic sanctions. Instead, it proposes, in the best tradition of internationalism and humanitarianism, a forum where the two sides can meet as equals. Motion 24.4259 calls for a peace summit under international supervision, in order to negotiate the safe and collective return of the Armenian population to their homes.

The Swiss Peace Initiative has not failed to find support in other countries. Last June, the leaders of a British parliamentary group representing 110 MPs publicly endorsed the Swiss Peace Initiative. Last July, 87 members of the U.S. Congress wrote to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, asking him to support the Swiss Peace Initiative. The White House responded to this letter by affirming that U.S. is, quote, "encouraging both [the Azerbaijani and the Armenian] governments to provide for the return of ethnic Armenians to Nagorno-Karabakh in the context of a sustainable peace."

It is with great regret, then, that we note that, until now, the Swiss Federal Council has taken few visible steps to implement the mandate it has received from both houses of the Swiss parliament.

When Federal Councilor Ignazio Cassis has been asked by members of parliament to explain his inaction on this mandate, he has replied that Switzerland supports the peace process between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan, and that neither of these two governments is interested in such a peace forum for Nagorno Karabakh.

Indeed, the current prime minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, has made it abundantly clear that he will not uphold the rights of the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh. Rather the opposite. He has condemned all discussion of the right of return as, quote, “a dangerous and harmful topic.” Last week, the prime minister gave a speech before the European Parliament in Brussels, in which he declared that “our Karabakh sisters and brothers must receive Armenian citizenship and be permanently settled in the Republic of Armenia.” Prime Minister Pashinyan seems to believe that a permanent peace can be built on ethnic cleansing.

This stance from the Armenian prime minister, however, is not an argument against the Swiss Peace Initiative. It is a powerful argument *for* it. The Armenian government does not represent the interests of the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh. Prime Minister Pashinyan has made that abundantly clear. That is precisely why it is so important that the elected representatives of the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh be given a platform where *they* can represent their people.

Another reason that Federal Councillor Cassis has stated that his government cannot hold a peace forum is that, quote, “Switzerland does not recognize Nagorno-Karabakh as a state entity. Consequently, it does not maintain any contacts with representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh.”

This raises a fairly obvious question: why not?

There is nothing in Swiss law to prevent the government from making contact with non-state entities, or with unrecognized entities. It has done so many times in the past. Switzerland’s status as a neutral state makes it ideally positioned to play this role.

For over thirty years, the people of Nagorno Karabakh exercised their right to self-determination by choosing their own leaders. While the Republic of Artsakh was not recognized by any other country in the world, it was an independent state. It met all the criteria for statehood defined by the Treaty of Montevideo – a permanent population, a defined territory, a government, and the ability to enter into relations with other states. Artsakh's leaders represented their people in peace negotiations led by the OSCE's Minsk Group. And even today, nearly two and a half years after their forced displacement, their government continues to function, in accordance with the constitution of the Republic of Artsakh. The Artsakh National Assembly has appointed a committee to campaign abroad for the right of return abroad. Two of its members are here with us today – Mr. Karnig Kerkonian, and Mr. Mario Nalpatian.

This Monday, Mr. Kerkonian spoke on the floor of the UN Human Rights Council. There, he affirmed that, "The elected representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh stand ready to participate in the Peace Forum mandated by the Swiss Parliament last year."

The Swiss government does not lack the ability to carry out its mandate from parliament. What it lacks is the will, or perhaps, the vision. Perhaps, like so many other governments, the Swiss Federal Council really believes that the Nagorno Karabakh conflict will simply go away, that the conflict has already been solved, not through negotiations, but through ethnic cleansing.

The current catastrophe engulfing the Middle East shows how shortsighted it is to believe that a durable peace can be built on raw exercise of power. Just several weeks ago, it seemed that Azerbaijan had succeeded in using military force to make itself the master of the South Caucasus. Now a new exercise of military force has thrown the region's entire status quo into question.

Few things are certain about the course the war between the United States, Israel and Iran will take. But one thing is certain – it will not last forever. And when it ends, only a comprehensive diplomatic settlement based on international law will be able to assure security in this vital region.

Now is the time to start preparing the ground for that settlement. Now is the time for Switzerland to take a leadership role. A new diplomatic

initiative to settle the Nagorno Karabakh conflict for good –based human rights and international law, not force – will provide a model the entire region can follow, and help to create a new momentum for peace, a peace that will benefit not just to people of Nagorno Karabakh, but the people of Azerbaijan, and indeed, the people of the whole world.