



## **Nagorno-Karabakh: Protection and safety of persons with disabilities**

### **Open letter to the international community - including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the European Union – and to the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan.**

The European Disability Forum (EDF) calls for all actors to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities impacted by the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis.

Actors must respect:

- Their obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in particular [Article 11 on situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies](#).
- the [UN Security Council Resolution 2475](#) (2019) on Protection of Persons with Disabilities in Conflict.
- International Humanitarian Law, International Refugee Law, and the Humanitarian Principles.

In any situation of crisis or conflict, persons with disabilities face disproportionate risk of abandonment, violence, death, and a lack of access to safety, relief, and recovery support. Women with disabilities are at increased risk of sexual violence. Children with disabilities are more exposed to abuse and neglect. Crucial information on safety and evacuation is often inaccessible, and evacuation locations themselves are also rarely accessible, meaning that persons with disabilities are too often left behind.

**According to the UN Refugees Agency, [more than 100,000 refugees have arrived in Armenia](#) between 24 September and 4 October 2023. The agency reports that “many of the new arrivals are vulnerable, including older people, women and children, pregnant women, people living with disabilities and people chronic health conditions...”.**

According to information made available to the European Disability Forum, there were issues with the evacuation of persons with disabilities, which created disproportionate barriers for them and their families. We also understood that persons with disabilities who did evacuate are unable to find accessible accommodation, and are being placed in residential institutions or sleeping in rough, inadequate and precarious arrangements. In all such situations, risk of violence, abuse and death highly increases.

**We call on the political leadership and all humanitarian actors dealing with this crisis to ensure that persons with disabilities:**

- Have full access to all humanitarian aid.
- Are meaningfully involved in all humanitarian action, through their representative organisations.
- Are protected from violence, ill-treatment and abuse.
- Are accounted for and not abandoned: it is also essential that measures are in place which fully include people living in institutional settings; and relocation and evacuation measures should not force more persons with disabilities to live in such institutions.
- Are provided with accessible information about safety and assistance protocols, evacuation procedures and support.
- Have full access to basic services including food and non-food items, shelter, water and sanitation, mental health and psychosocial support, education, healthcare, rehabilitation services, transport and information.
- Have full access to specific services, assistive devices and support networks that may be required in relation to disability.
- Are fully included in Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) and in all forms of livelihood support.
- Are able to return to their homes if already displaced, and fully included in all aid (as listed above) if still residing in Nagorno-Karabakh.

**It is essential that:**

- Measures are taken so all data on the affected population is disaggregated by disability (using, for example, the [Washington Group short set of questions](#)).
- Specific budget is dedicated to accessibility and reasonable accommodation for inclusion of persons with disabilities from the beginning of all initiatives.
- Particular attention is paid to those who are most at risk – including but not limited to – women, children, elderly persons, blind and deafblind persons, persons with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities, and persons with high support needs.

Working towards all of the above, the European Disability Forum recommends that all actors involved adhere to the [IASC Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action](#).

Commenting on the situation, EDF President Yannis Vardakastanis said:

“Persons with disabilities in or fleeing from Nagorno-Karabakh are at great risk of abandonment, abuse and even death. They cannot be left behind, and that is why we call on governments and aid agencies to fulfil their responsibilities and ensure that persons with disabilities are fully protected, supported and involved in all decision-making processes.”