

Economy shows first signs of post-crisis recovery, Armenian PM says



Armenia - A Cabinet meeting, chaired by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, February 18, 2021

Armenia’s economy is showing the first signs of the post-crisis recovery, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said on February 18 during Cabinet meeting.

“According to the data of the first 15 days of February, 604,000 more transactions with cash registers and settlement documents have been registered than in the first 15 days of February 2020. And the trade turnover increased by 12% or nearly 31,4 billion drams compared to the first 15 days of February 2020. I would like to remind that the COVID-19 impact didn’t exist in early February 2020 because no coronavirus case has been confirmed in the country that time. And February 2020 has recorded a very serious growth against February 2019”, the PM said.

Pashinyan stated that the export and import volumes have also

greatly increased in the first 15 days of February. “The conclusion from here is that the economy seems is entering into a recovery phase, and this, of course, is very important news”, he added.

At the meeting Chairman of the State Revenue Committee Edvard Hovhannisyan clarified that the growth in the trade turnover mainly relates to three fields – retail consumption, manufacturing and services.

In his turn Minister of Economy Vahan Kerobyan noted that attention should be paid on the consumption growth. “We should continue the support provided to the economy until we are sure that we are in stable condition”, he added.

PM Pashinyan stated that the government continues all assistance programs for the business.

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Armenian, Russian FM's discuss issues of regional security and stability



On a working visit to Foreign Minister Ara Aivazian met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. The interlocutors stressed the high level of allied cooperation between Armenia and Russia, both bilaterally and internationally, within the frame-

work of regional security and integration standards.

The interlocutors attached importance to holding sectoral consultations between the political departments of the two countries, and maintaining an intensive dialogue at different levels.

The Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Russia spoke in detail about regional security and stability. They exchanged views on the implementation of the provisions of the November 9 and January 11 trilateral statements.

In the context of the urgent humanitarian issues, Minister Aivazian stressed the

importance of repatriation of prisoners of war and hostages, noting that the artificial delay of the issue by Azerbaijan poses serious obstacles to the implementation of trilateral statements.

Minister Aivazian praised the efforts of the Russian side to improve the humanitarian situation in Artsakh.

Issues related to the resumption of the Nagorno Karabakh peace process were also on the agenda of the meeting. The sides attached importance to addressing the key issues of the settlement within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairing.

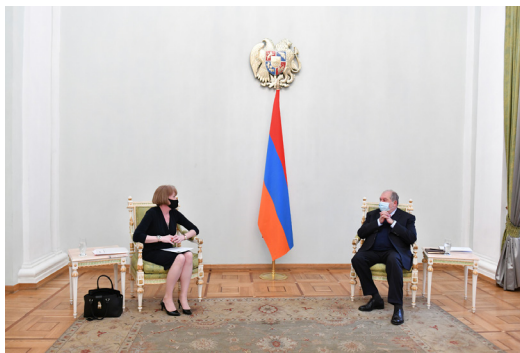
Armenia, UK keen to deepen cooperation in IT, healthcare, science and education

President Armen Sarkissian received Wendy Morton, Minister for European Neighborhood and the Americas at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

Welcoming Minister Morton's working visit to Armenia, President Sarkissian noted that the two countries have great potential for developing cooperation.

The meeting focused on the situation after the Artsakh war, security issues and stability in the region.

The parties emphasized the role of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs in the final



settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Among a number of priority issues including humanitarian ones, President Sarkissian stressed the need for immediate

return of Armenian prisoners of war and civilians from Azerbaijan, as well as the preservation of Armenian historical and cultural heritage in Azerbaijani-controlled territories.

The interlocutors discussed the cooperation between the two countries in the prevention and spread of the epidemic. Cooperation in the fields of information technology, artificial intelligence, healthcare, science and education, energy and a number of other fields was considered promising. Cooperation in the fight against climate change was also emphasized.

Pashinyan, Putin emphasize the need for soonest return of POWs and other detainees

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan had a telephone conversation with the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin.

The parties discussed the implementation of the provisions of the joint statement of November 9, 2020.

The need for soonest return of prisoners of war, hostages and other detainees was

emphasized.

The Armenian side expressed concern over Azerbaijan's failure to comply with the requirements of the joint statement.

Issues on the agenda of bilateral cooperation between Armenia and Russia, the ways of further development of the allied cooperation were also discussed.



Prosecutors seek to criminalize defamation of Armenian officials

(RFE/RL) - In a move condemned by press freedom groups, Armenian prosecutors have drafted legislation that would make defamation of government, law-enforcement and other state officials a crime punishable by up to two years in prison.

All forms of defamation were decriminalized in Armenia in 2010 during the rule of former President Serzh Sargsyan. The move was recommended by the Council of Europe.

A bill circulated by the Office of the Prosecutor-General and posted on a government website on Wednesday says that slander and insults directed at state officials performing their duties have become commonplace and must be criminalized. It says that individuals making slanderous claims through mass media or other public channels must face up to two years' imprisonment and heavy fines.

Armenia's leading media organizations expressed serious concern over the bill on Thursday, saying that it could be used by the authorities as a "tool" against legitimate criticism. In a joint statement, they described it as a "logical continuation" of recent legislative measures aimed at restricting press freedom in the country.



The statement pointed to the Armenian parliament's decision last week to approve a fivefold increase in maximum legal fines set for defamation as well as pro-government lawmakers' separate proposal to make it harder for journalists to use anonymous sources.

"We are expressing our disappointment with the fact that the authorities formed as a result of the 2018 revolution are planning unacceptable restrictions on the freedom of expression," stated the 11 organizations.

"We do not want at all to defend slanderers and offenders," they said. "But we find it necessary to remind that representatives of the authorities, officials and public figures must show utmost tolerance towards any criticism."

The prosecutors' initiative has been effectively endorsed by the Armenian Ministry of Justice. But it is not yet clear whether Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government will back the proposed criminalization of defamation.

Some parliamentarians affiliated with Pashinyan's My Step bloc said last week that they would hail such a measure.

Daniel Ioannisyanyan of the Union of Informed Citizens also criticized the prosecutors' bill on Thursday, saying that it could result in media censorship.

"You will definitely find no European or democratic country that makes it a crime to insult or slander authorities but not [ordinary] citizens," Ioannisyanyan told RFE/RL's Armenian Service.

"True, there are countries, including democratic ones, where defamation is a criminal offense ... But there is no [democratic] country where insulting authorities is deemed a crime but insulting citizens is not," he said.

Ioannisyanyan said the authorities should tackle instead the spread of false information by anonymous or fake social media accounts.

9094 troops wounded in action in Artsakh War, says Armenian prosecution

9094 servicemen of the Armenian military were wounded in action during the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh War, the general prosecution announced on February 18 at a consultation on the military prosecution's activities.

The final death toll isn't yet available because of the ongoing identification of bodies and the search operations.

But the prosecution noted that in 2020 the bodies of 3389 servicemen were identified.

Speaking on the criminal cases related to the war, Prosecutor General Artur Davt-



yan said that it is necessary for a deep, comprehensive and fully objective investigation to give legal assessments to the

Turkey-backed Azerbaijani war of aggression, the gross violations of international humanitarian law against servicemen, civilians and towns of Armenia and Artsakh, the Azeri crimes against humanity and use of prohibited munitions, as well as deployment of international terrorists by Azerbaijan.

Other issues related to the military were also discussed at the meeting.

Defense Minister V. Harutyunyan said that revealing all circumstances concerning the war is of urgent necessity.

Opposition holds rally, march in Yerevan



The opposition Homeland Salvation Movement held a rally in Yerevan. The parties involved in the movement and their supporters demand Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to step down.

Addressing the rally, Vazgen Manukyan, the Movement's candidate for the post of Prime Minister, said the day is symbolic, as it marks the 33rd anniversary of the start of the Artsakh movement.

"Artsakh – the only island left inhabited by its native people, Armenians, after the genocide – applied for unification with Armenia. And all our people stood up. We have come a long way since then. From the very beginning of the Karabakh movement, other issues were raised. We felt very strong. We set bigger goals. We set the task of creating an independent state, an independent state based on national ideas, the idea of freedom, justice, prosperity for the whole nation, protection, role in the world and in this region. And we went forward," said Manukyan.

Speaking about plans, he noted that everyday work is needed to achieve change of power. He stressed the need to create committees in different parts of the country.

He called to organize strikes, demonstrations, walk around Armenia in convoys of cars, get people up. "It takes time and work," he said.

Ishkhan Saghatelyan, coordinator of



the Homeland Salvation Movement and representative of the ARF Supreme Body, said that from February 22, disobedience rallies will be held in Yerevan every day to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

At the organizers' urging, the protesters split and marched in four different directions after the rally, chanting "Armenia without Nikol!" and blocking major street intersections in the city center. Riot police did not attempt to disperse them and guarded key government buildings instead.

The opposition alliance blames Pash-

inyan for Armenia's defeat in the six-week war in Nagorno-Karabakh stopped by a Russian-brokered ceasefire on November 10. It staged a series of demonstrations later in November and December in a bid to force him to hand over power to an interim government.

Those protests did not attract large crowds, leading Pashinyan to insist that he still has a popular mandate to govern the country.

The prime minister also expressed readiness on December 25 to hold snap parliamentary elections to end the political crisis in the country. Opposition leaders continued to insist on his resignation.

The ruling My Step bloc pointed to the opposition stance when it stated on February 7 that Pashinyan and his allies see no need to dissolve the current parliament. It also claimed that most Armenians do not want snap elections. The Homeland Salvation Movement announced afterwards its decision to resume anti-government rallies.



Former Yerevan Mayor Indicted

A law-enforcement agency has brought criminal charges against Yerevan's former Mayor Taron Markaryan and three other former government officials.

The Investigative Committee claimed on February 18 that Markaryan abused his had powers to sell three plots of municipal land to his cronies from in 2011-2014. The land belonging to public schools was privatized at knockdown prices, it said without specifying financial details of those deals.

In a statement, the committee said that two other former senior officials of Yerevan's municipal administration as well as Arman Sahakyan, a former head of the Armenian government's Department of State



Property Management, have been indicted as part of the same criminal case. It did not elaborate.

Markaryan's lawyer, Benik Galstyan, was quick to laugh off the accusations, saying that his client regards them as a "farce." He claimed investigators are illegally refusing to share with him all materials of the

case and that he does not know "what exactly Mr. Markaryan is accused of."

In a Facebook post, Galstyan also said that Markaryan travelled to Moscow on February 7 for medical treatment and returned to Armenia on February 13 two days after being notified of his impending indictment.

Markaryan, 42, served as Yerevan mayor from 2011-2018. Both he and Sahakyan are senior members of former President Serzh Sarkisian's Republican Party of Armenia (HHK).

Markaryan's late father Andranik was Armenia's prime minister from 2000-2007. The latter headed the HHK until his sudden death in 2007.

Nikol Pashinyan remain most popular politician in Armenia – survey

According to the recent survey conducted by GALLUP International Association in Armenia, Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan remains the most popular politician in Armenia.

Director of the Armenian Office of Gallup International Association Aram Navasardyan presented the results of the survey in a press conference.

The survey was carried out from February 15-17.

The participants of the survey evaluated their attitude towards politicians on a scale of 1-5 points.

PM Pashinyan received 2.8 points,

President Armen Sarkissian received 2.3 points,

First President Levon Ter-Petrosyan received 1.7 points,

2nd President Robert Kocharyan received 2 points,

3rd President Serzh Sargsyan received 1.7 points,

Head of “Prosperous Armenia” Party Gagik Tsarukyan received 2.2 points,

Head of “Bright Armenia” Party Edmon Marukyan received 1.8 points,



Head of “Fatherland” Party Artur Vanetsyan received 1.5 points,

Leader of “Fatherland Salvation Movement” Vazgen Manukyan received 1.6 points and representative of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation Ishkhan Saghatlyan received 1.6 points.

37.1% of the participants said that snap elections are definitely necessary, 21.3% said that it would be better to hold snap elections, 13.6% said it would not be better to hold snap elections and 19.7% said that snap elections are not necessary. Overall, nearly 58% said that there is a necessity for snap elections.

41.2% of the participants said that the elections should be held under Nikol Pashinyan’s leadership, 28.2% said that the elections should be organized without Nikol Pashinyan’s leadership and 7.9%

said that the elections should be organized by the interim government proposed by the opposition.

The participants were also asked which party they would vote for if parliamentary elections were held on Sunday. The “My Step” faction received 33.1%, the “Prosperous Armenia” party - 4.4%, the “Bright Armenia” party - 2.6%, the “Republican Party of Armenia” - 2.2%, the “Armenian Revolutionary Federation” party - 2.2%. “Fatherland” party - 0.9%, “Republic” party - 0.7%, “Sasna Tsrer” - 0.4%, “Citizen’s decision” - 0.2%, etc. There were responses also regarding individuals - 5.6% said they would vote for Robert Kocharyan, 0.9% for Vazgen Manukyan. The option “No vote for anyone” was chosen by 27.2% of the respondents.

38.8% of the respondents said Pashinyan should remain in post, 43.6 said he should step down. 17.6% found it difficult to answer. Navasardyan noted that if during the previous survey conducted on November 12, 2020 35% of the respondents said Pashinyan should resign, not this number has increased by nearly 9%.

Political consultations held between Armenian, German Foreign Ministries

On February 18, political consultations were held between the Foreign Ministries of the Republic of Armenia and Federal Republic of Germany. The political consultations were co-chaired by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia Avet Adonts and Director for Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia at the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs Michael Siebert.

During the consultations both sides discussed a broad agenda of the



Armenian-German relations: the intensification of political dialogue and the sig-

nificance of mutual high-level visits; the current projects in financial-economic, development policy and humanitarian fields, as well as the cooperation within international formats.

The parties also touched upon the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the regional security issues highlighting the importance of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairmanship format in its settlement, including the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh. A special emphasis was put on the issues of the prisoners of war and the humanitarian assistance.

Armenia, UAE discuss perspectives of high-tech cooperation

Armenia's Minister of High-Tech Industry Hakob Arshakyan and UAE Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, Digital Economy and Teleworking Applications Omar Bin Sultan Al Olama discussed the possible directions of cooperation in the fields of artificial intelligence and high technologies.

Omar Bin Sultan Al Olam noted that they are moving toward a new digital strategy.

Minister Arshakyan informed, in turn, that the Armenian government has recently approved the Digitalization Strategy, which can also serve as a platform for cooperation



Armenian Virtual Bridge" program in the UAE, which will allow Armenian technology start-ups to have a proper representation in the UAE, participate in various state events, competitions and receive investments from the Arab side.

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During the meeting, they also discussed the idea of having an Armenian corner within the framework of the "Ar-

Hakob Arshakyan invited his UAE counterpart to participate in the 3rd International Exhibition of Defense Technologies #ArmHiTec2021, which will be held in Armenia on March 25-27, 2021.

Iran to help establish technology fund in Armenia



Iran is to help Armenia in the domain of technology and boost corporate cooperation with the country.

Director of Iran's National Innovation Fund (INIF) Ali Vahdat announced that the

institution stands ready to help launch Armenia's Technology Fund, *Iran Front Page* reports.

"I suggest a region be established for the joint production of goods by Iranian and Armenian companies, and end products be offered on world markets," he said.

"We will financially support Iranian companies to launch their production sites in Armenia," he added.

"Given the good experience of the [Iranian] Innovation Fund in providing fi-

nancial support for the innovation ecosystem in Iran, we can help make Armenia's Technology become operational," Vahdat explained.

He said Iran is also prepared to launch a sci-tech park in Armenia and share its experience with the country in that regard.

"Armenia can be a gateway for Iranian products to find their way into European and Eurasian markets," he said.

Vahdat also called for the enhancement of Iran-Armenia trade.

"Iran-Armenia economic relations stood at less than \$500 million at their peak while there was potential for the figure to be higher," he said.

Armenian government provides 470 mln AMD for construction of new district in the border village of Shurnukh

470 mln AMD will be provided from government reserve funds for the construction of a new residential district in Shurnukh, Syunik Province. The relevant decision was okayed during the cabinet meeting on February 18.

Presenting the project, Head of the Urban Development Committee Armen Ghularyan said the construction of 13 houses is expected to be completed by the end of

the year.

The second stage will be completed in 2022 and will see the construction of the necessary infrastructure.

In the third stage it could be necessary to establish certain structures of public and industrial significance, Ghularyan said. A dozen families in the village of Shurnukh were left without shelter after their homes

appeared on disputed territory as a result of border demarcation.



Iran to set up permanent exhibition of knowledge-based products in Armenia

Iran is going to set up a permanent exhibition of products manufactured by knowledge-based companies in Armenia, *Tehran Times* reports.

A delegation comprising representatives of 26 Iranian knowledge-based companies headed to Armenia on February 17 with the aim of promoting their technological products and expand the market in the neighboring country.

Organized by the vice presidency for science and technology, the delegation is scheduled to hold meetings with Armenian high-tech and health ministers and pay a visit to Alliance free zone during the four-day visit.

The delegation comprises companies active in the fields of textile, agriculture and related machinery, construction, petrochemicals, cosmetics and hygiene, organic food, and digital equipment.



On January 27, Vice-President for Science and Technology, Sourena Sattari, met with Armenian Economy Minister Vahan Kerobyan in Tehran to discuss ways to expand technological cooperation.

Praising Iran's scientific and technological achievements, Kerobyan said "We agree with the implementation of a project in the field of creating a joint technology park between Iran and Armenia as soon as possible and the formation of a team to develop bilateral cooperation."

Sattari, said for his part, that Iran has four million students with high knowledge capacity so that the country relies on them to move toward a knowledge-based economy.

There are currently 6,000 knowledge-based companies operating in Iran, and last year they generated a revenue of about \$12 billion, he highlighted.

He emphasized that Iran has the largest startups in the region in the field of information and communication technology, biotechnology, nanotechnology, stem cells, etc., and about 50 technology parks have been formed throughout Iran.

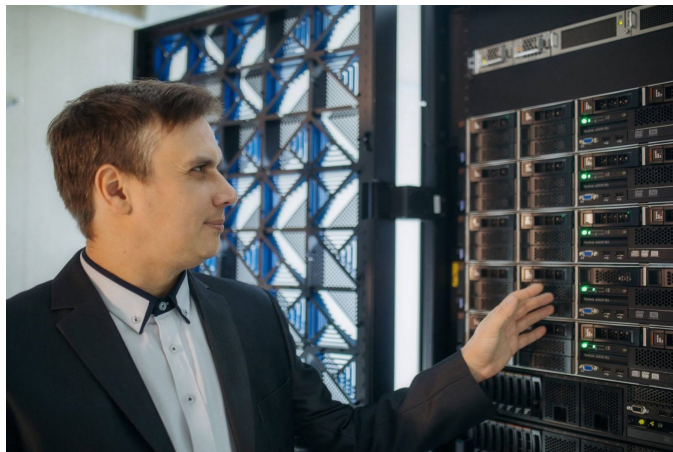
Noting that 98 percent of the medicine needed in the country is produced domestically, he said that a large number of Armenian scientists and academics are studying in Iranian universities.

Armenian, Russian scientists to equip space vision systems with autonomous intelligence

Solutions developed by Armenian and Russian scholars will allow equipping satellites and drones with autonomous and inexpensive "smart vision," the Samara University said in a press release.

The software complex developed by scientists from the Samara National Research University after academician Korolev (Samara University) and the Russian Armenian University will greatly simplify the massive introduction of hyperspectral technologies.

"Based on the results of research, in 2022 it is planned to create a prototype of a universal computer system that dynamically adjusts to each task of image analysis by automatically generating and selecting special informative features based on the algorithms being developed," said the project manager, head of the department of



technical cybernetics of Samara University, professor Alexander Kupriyanov.

According to him, such a computer system will significantly increase the efficiency of solving many applied problems of digital image analysis, including in the field of geoinformatics, smart farming, remote sensing of the Earth and medical di-

agnostics.

The approach proposed by an international group of scientists allows to calculate informative features of object identification autonomously – without using complex classifiers and neural networks. It is based on a technique that allows, by controlling one parameter, to select the optimal filter for processing the entire image. Now scientists are developing a self-learning algorithm that can independently calculate such informative features necessary for recognizing objects in hyperspectral images.

The project has received grant support from the Russian Foundation for Basic Research and the Science Committee of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of the Republic of Armenia.

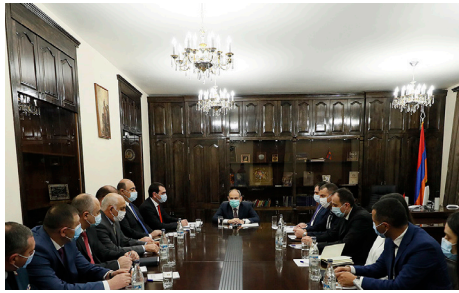
“We must rebuild Armenia, Shirak province, Gyumri in a new way” - PM

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan traveled to Shirak Marz to discuss ongoing and forthcoming programs and strategic issues. Minister of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure Suren Papikyan, Minister of Economy Vahan Kerobyan, Chief of Staff of the Office of the Prime Minister Arsen Torosyan, Shirak Marz Governor Hovhannes Haroutunyan, Mayor of Gyumri Samvel Balasanyan, the deputy governors and other officials attended the meeting.

Before discussing the agenda, Prime Minister Pashinyan said: “It is crucial for the state and the local government to act in sync in order to complete the process of post-war social, psychological, and economic recovery. Last year we witnessed a tangible shift in Shirak Marz and in the city of Gyumri, in particular. The coronavirus and the war changed the situation to some extent. Now not only must we ensure that the ongoing programs are completed properly, but that there are new programs and incentives developed. The situation and the overall environment have to be changed in practice, so that the Republic of Armenia, as a whole, and Shirak Marz, Gyumri, in particular, might enjoy a situation satisfactory for all of us. On the way here I recalled our motto: “Let us rebuild Armenia anew.” This slogan, which we adopted back in the pre-crisis period, is now more relevant both in the direct and figurative sense of the word. We must formulate the task as follows: We must rebuild Armenia, Shirak Marz and Gyumri in a new way. I am pleased to state that the process of rebuilding Gyumri in a new way has been launched and is going on. This is a good example that we should follow up.”

The Governor and the Deputy Governors reported back last year's results. They noted in particular that due to the global pandemic and the war, the programs provided for in the region were implemented by 80-90%. They assured that both the unfinished programs and the ones planned for 2021 will be completed this year.

Last year the region carried out subvention programs for the development and improvement of community infrastructure



to a total cost of 3.3 billion drams. Communities have already submitted applications for 62 subvention programs for the current year to an estimated total cost of 4.4 billion drams.

Highlighting the effective implementation of subvention programs both in Shirak Marz and across the country, in general, the Premier stressed the need for daily monitoring and control to ensure appropriate quality of work.

“Given the peculiarities of the past year, we need to implement large-scale capital programs nationwide with renewed ardor and energy. Adequate funding will be made available for any good, effective, meaningful project that may help create a positive mood in the country. All companies and investors should be encouraged to implement projects conducive to maximum economic result, simultaneously ensuring proper quality standards and efficiency of construction activities,” Nikol Pashinyan said.

The Premier noted that the Government is prepared to provide incentives and help investors in building lifeline infrastructure, such as asphalt paving, gas and water supply networks. “In this way, we will encourage capital investments that will yield good economic results and generate new jobs,” the Head of Government said.

Coming to the progress in agricultural activities, Governor Hovhannes Haroutunyan advised that last year only 47,000 out of 78,000 hectares of arable land were cultivated in the region. In cooperation with the Ministries of Economy and Territorial Administration and Infrastructure, the regional administration continues to endeavor towards increasing the coverage of cultivated land by encouraging the creation of modern orchards and greenhouses.

In turn, Mayor of Gyumri Samvel Balasanyan noted that about 70 modern buses will be delivered to the city by this yearend, which will help drastically improve the municipal transport network. As part of a subvention program, photovoltaic panels will be installed in the city, which will help save a large amount of energy at the facilities under the jurisdiction of the municipality.

31 streets were repaired in Gyumri after 2019 under several subvention programs, 37 streets were repaired with funds available from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Some 180 kilometers of roads - 70% of local streets - will be rehabilitated in Gyumri by the end of 2022. According to Samvel Balasanyan, in cooperation with the World Bank, the city's lighting network will be improved this year. Work is underway to ensure a twenty-four-hour water supply in the city. The Mayor advised that bus stops are being repaired in Gyumri, while the problem of sanitation has been completely solved. The city is provided with all necessary equipment. In parallel, works are underway to repair and expand the area of Friendship Park to 7.2 hectares. Concerning the construction of the North-South highway, those in charge reported that the construction of the Talin-Lanjik and Lanjik-Gyumri sections will be continued this year.

Speaking about the COVID-19 crisis, the Governor assured that the situation is under control. There are currently 48 COVID-19 patients in the region, with a total of 265 cases reported in January.

The meeting next focused on issues related to housing problems in Gyumri and the needs of Artsakh people who moved to Shirak Marz following the war. The heads of regional divisions of the Prosecutor's Office, the Investigative Committee and the police made reports, presenting progress in the field of law enforcement.

The residents of Mastara, Ashnak, Nerkin Bazmaberd and Ujan communities stopped the Prime Minister's convoy on the Gyumri-Yerevan highway and expressed their support for the head of government.

Armenian Ambassador updates US Congressmen on crisis caused by Azerbaijani aggression against Artsakh

In a letter to Members of the US House of Representatives, Armenia's Ambassador to the US Varuzhan Nersesyan Ambassador Nersesyan's letter to members of updated them on the ongoing humanitarian crisis caused by Azerbaijan's six-week war last fall against the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh), and stressed that the difficult road toward a sustainable peace will require the renewed and active engagement of the United States from both the legislative and executive branches.

The letter runs as follows:

The terrible human costs of the Baku's aggression are clear. Thousands killed. Tens of thousands injured. As many as 90,000 indigenous Armenians forced by Azerbaijani attacks to flee their ancestral homeland. Groups as diverse as the World Council of Churches and the Metropolitan Museum of Art have decried Azerbaijan's desecration of historic Christian holy sites. Without exaggeration, this is the worst act of ethnic cleansing by a state that the region has seen in decades.

To this day, Azerbaijan continues to illegally hold hundreds of Armenian prisoners – women and men, civilians and soldiers – many of whom have been tortured, mutilated, and even murdered in ISIS-style beheadings on social media. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet referred to specific cases of summary executions of captured Armenians by Azerbaijan's military as a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions and thus war crimes.

On the critical issue of POWs, in addition to violating international law and Geneva Conventions, Azerbaijan has ignored the principle of "all for all" was a requirement of the November 9, 2020 tripartite statement that established the current ceasefire. While Armenia estimates approximately 200 captives, Azerbaijan only acknowledges 57 captives and have fabricated criminal complaints against the vast majority of recognized POWs, intentionally misrepresenting them as terrorist. While the European Court on Human Rights has issued a final notice for Azerbaijan to respond regarding information on detainees, Armenia is deeply concerned that Azerbaijan has politicized the process and may use captives and hostages for human trafficking and slavery, a particularly alarming notion given how many civilians – including women – are being held.

These are the consequences of a large-



scale war, unprecedented in many ways, carried out by Baku with the full backing of Ankara. The Armenians of Artsakh were confronted with a massive, well-armed attack by the combined forces of Azerbaijan and Turkey and – as has been confirmed by UN Working Group on Use of Mercenaries, France and other Western nations – thousands of foreign terrorist jihadists from Syria recruited, paid, and transported by Turkey to join the conflict. To terrorize the local population into fleeing their homes, Azerbaijani armed forces targeted civilian population and critical infrastructure, such as hospitals, schools, and churches, using Western military drone technology and heavy artillery.

In the wake of a fragile ceasefire brokered by Russia, Azerbaijan has continued to recklessly undertake provocative and hostile actions. They have refused to respect key obligations, including the immediate and unconditional exchange of prisoners of war and hostages by using a legal loophole to falsely label our Armenian captives as criminals. In December, Azerbaijan's President again claimed ownership of broad territories of Armenia, including our capital of Yerevan. Since the start of February, Turkey and Azerbaijan have conducted offensive military drills on Turkey's border with Armenia, threatening to complete the genocide they started a century ago once again.

While the fragile November ceasefire continues to hold, the final status and sustainable settlement of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict remains unresolved. Only a political, negotiated resolution based on the right of democratic self-determination may bring lasting peace and reconciliation to the South Caucasus region. To achieve this, Armenia and international community need the renewed diplomatic engagement of the United States through the existing and established international mechanism: the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairmanship that the United States already co-leads with

France and Russia. We were heartened to hear Secretary of State Antony Blinken's plans for active engagement of the United States in this process during his tenure, and we respectfully call on the United States to work toward the de-occupation by Azerbaijan of the territories of Nagorno-Karabakh, safe and dignified return to their homes of the recently displaced population of Artsakh, and protection of the cultural and religious sites and monuments in the territories which fell under Azerbaijani control.

While the State Department will lead this diplomatic process, the United States Congress can also play an important role to advance peace and security in Artsakh. For example, in FY 2018 and 2019, Azerbaijan was allocated over \$100 million in security aid. Congress should cease any further generosity towards Azerbaijan, which has demonstrated that it will use any and all military assets for offensive purposes. Further, Congress should consider appropriate financial sanctions against Azerbaijan and Turkey's leadership to create consequences for undermining a peace process co-led by America. Finally, the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Artsakh has seen tens of thousands displaced from their homes in the midst of a global pandemic. We are grateful for the humanitarian aid provided to date by USAID, and we would ask for the United States to consider large-scale humanitarian and developmental aid to assist Artsakh and Armenia in caring for and protecting displaced civilians.

The Armenian people have demonstrated their commitment to democratic values, as reflected in the State Department's decision to upgrade our bilateral ties to the level of Strategic Dialogue. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan, a petrol-state ruled by a hereditary regime, is ranked by Freedom House among the 15 least free nations in the world. For its part, Turkey – a NATO member subject to CAATSA sanctions – is described by Amnesty International as "the world's largest prison for journalists."

To keep Armenia's democracy safe – and to protect the essential right of self-determination for the people of Artsakh – Armenia needs the diplomatic engagement of the United States to constructively address and eventually overcome the crisis incited by Azerbaijan and Turkey. Your legislative support for American leadership in this direction would hold great meaning for the Armenian people.

EU allocates additional €3 million in humanitarian aid for civilians affected by Karabakh conflict

The European Commission has announced €3 million in humanitarian aid to assist those affected by the recent large-scale hostilities in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, including a significant number of displaced people. Since the beginning of the hostilities in September 2020, the EU has mobilized a total of €6.9 million in humanitarian assistance.

Commissioner for Crisis Management, Janez Lenarčič, said: *“Following the cessation of hostilities, the humanitarian crisis in the region remains dire and is currently exacerbated by the harsh winter and the coronavirus pandemic. The EU is stepping up its support for the conflict-affected population in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. It will help provide emergency supplies to those most in need.”*

The newly announced emergency support will help EU humanitarian partners to deliver food, shelter, winter items and other basic needs, as well as essential health services and psychosocial support to the affected population. All EU humanitarian funding is provided in line with the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

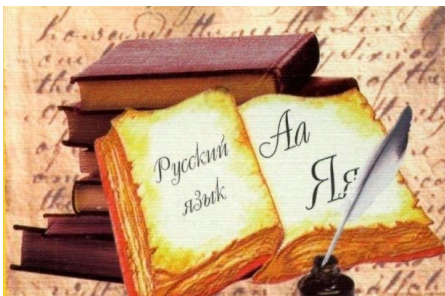
The recent military confrontation, which raged unabated for six weeks, caused casualties, damages and displacement. The fighting pushed hundreds of thousands to flee their homes for safety. Houses and public infrastructure such as schools, health system, roads, utilities and communication networks, were badly damaged. Alleged violations of International Humanitarian Law include the targeting of civilian infrastruc-



ture and use of banned cluster munitions.

Despite the ceasefire agreement struck between Armenia and Azerbaijan on 9 November 2020, the humanitarian situation remains of concern. The coronavirus pandemic and cold temperature further worsen the situation. The EU is in close contact with humanitarian partners and other stakeholders on the ground to support the coordination of the humanitarian response.

Artsakh considers granting official status to Russian



A draft submitted to Artsakh's National Assembly proposes granting an official status to the Russian language. Armenian will still remain the only state language in the republic.

The [bill](#) drafted by Vice-President of the National Assembly Gagik Baghunts, MPs Aram Harutyunyan and Metakse Hakobyan is currently being considered at the Parliament. It will then be put up for public debate, and changes could be made based on the proposals.

Co-authors of the bill says the necessity is based on “the historical memory of the cultural, military and economic relations between Artsakh and Russia and the fact that Russian is the second language of communication for many residents of Artsakh.”

The lawmakers say the proposed changes will create necessary conditions for deepening cooperation in all spheres, and in the foreseeable future will contribute to the development of relations within the legal framework.

“The need for a long-term presence of Russian peacekeepers in Artsakh, the joint solution of many social and communication problems, cooperation in the fields of construction, health, education and science requires a reassessment of the role of the Russian language,” the authors say.

Repat entrepreneur Vahe Keushguerian appointed Adviser to the Artsakh President

Repat entrepreneur Vahe Keushguerian has been appointed today as an Advisor to the Artsakh President on Development Programs, Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs informs.

He will fill the role on a volunteer basis.

The Office is confident that including Diaspora talent in state structures can play an important role in taking them to new heights.



“It is with this goal in mind that we launched the iGorts program to bring Diaspora Armenians to work in government

offices. Appointments like these, even outside the program, are always welcome news,” the Diaspora Affairs Office said in a Facebook post.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs launched the unprecedented iGorts program in March, inviting Diaspora Armenian professionals to work in Armenia's state institutions.

Over 184 tons of humanitarian aid delivered to Armenia with the support of Hayastan All Armenian Fund

Large-scale humanitarian aid has been sent to Armenia by different Diaspora communities since the very beginning of the war, through the efforts of the Diaspora and with the support of the Hayastan All Armenian Fund. To date, approximately 184,345 kg (more than 184 tons) of humanitarian aid has arrived in Armenia.

The assistance received includes modern medical equipment, first aid supplies, wound treatment and skin recovery products, warm winter clothes, shoes, sleeping bags, tents, beds, food, gift packages for Artsakh schoolchildren and so on.

During the war, starting on October 10th, through the efforts of Armenians living in the Diaspora and Armenian organizations from different communities, approximately 87,941 kg of humanitarian



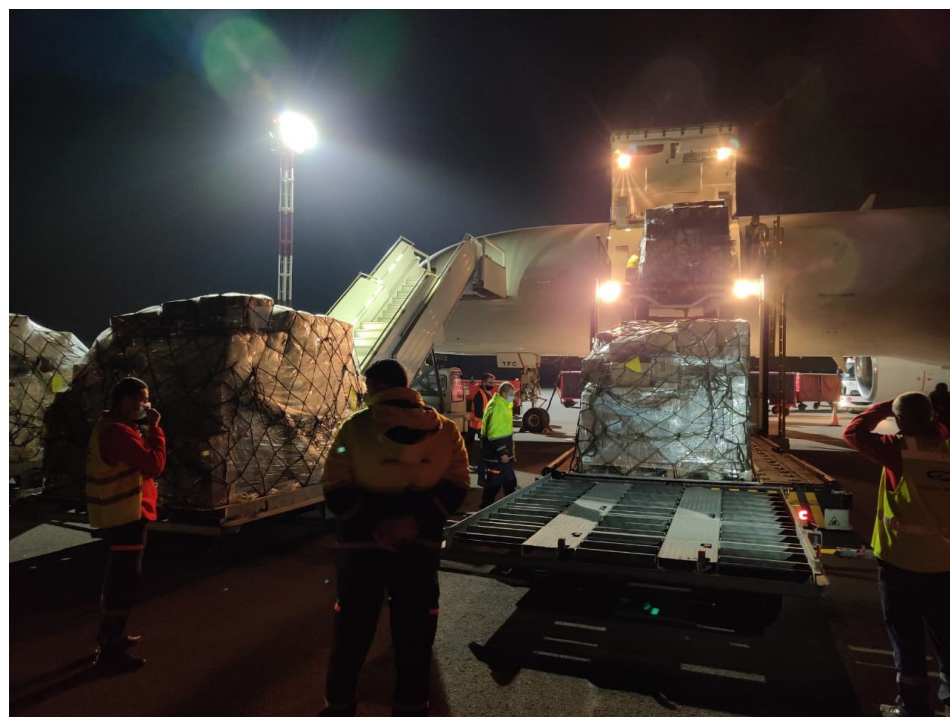
aid arrived on October 10th, 11th and 12th. Two planes arrived in Armenia from France and Belgium on Oc-

tober 23rd and October 26th, respectively, which delivered approximately 15,977 kg of humanitarian aid donated by different Armenian communities around Europe.

After the end of military actions, 33,389 kg of humanitarian aid arrived and was distributed directly by the Fund. Most of the aid received during this period originated from Los Angeles and France. Cargo shipments were received on November 19th, 20th, December 6th, 7th, 14th, 18th, 21st, 24th, 26th, 28th, 29th and January 14th, 2021.

The assistance received during this period was distributed to a number of health and community structures, including Kanaker-Zeytun Medical Center and Maternity Hospital, Institute of Hematology, Central Military Hospital, Martuni Medical Center, Kapan Medical Center, the regional administration of Tavush, Ararat and Gegharqunik, the Homeland Defender's Rehabilitation Center, Noyemberyan Medical Center, Surb Astvacamayr Medical Center, Vardenis Hospital, Erebuni Medical Center, Surb Grigor Lusavorich Medical Center, Goris Medical Center. Significant assistance was also provided to the Artsakh Ministry of Health.

Humanitarian aid continues to arrive in 2021 with approximately 63,015 kg of aid currently awaiting customs clearance, processing, and classification prior to distribution.



aid had been collected in the USA and Europe and transported to Armenia with the efforts of the All-Armenian Fund.

Cargo shipments were received from Los Angeles on October 10th, 15th, 16th, 19th, 22nd, 30th and 31st, with a total weight of approximately 61,549 kg, and

to ensure the swift and efficient delivery of aid to those most in need during



California Armenian Legislative Caucus urges colleagues to reject Azerbaijani propaganda

Asbarez – In a “Dear Colleague” letter, leaders of the California Armenian Legislative Caucus on February 19 urged their fellow lawmakers to “not spread misinformation” emanating from Azerbaijani propaganda material circulated to legislative offices about a fabricated “Khojaly Massacre.”

The letter, signed by Assembly members Laura Friedman and Adrin Nazarian, as well as Senators Anthony Portantino, and Senator Scott Wilk on behalf of the California Armenian Legislative Caucus, said “the request [by the propaganda authors] is a falsification of history and truth.”

The Armenian Caucus urged fellow lawmakers “to stand with the California Armenian Americans... and not spread misinformation.”

Below is the text of the letter:

Dear Colleague,

The California Armenian Legislative Caucus strongly urges you to stand with California Armenian Americans. Your office may have received a propaganda request regarding a fabricated Azerbaijani Khojaly Massacre. We urge you to stand with us and not spread misinformation.

The request is a falsification of the history and truth. In 1992, the Azeri's shelled Armenian civilian targets using rockets in the Republic of Artsakh (also known as Nagorno-Karabakh). As a result of Azeri attacks, Armenians suffered civilian casualties as well as hundreds of Armenians being kidnapped. With the help of Turkey, Azerbaijan blockaded all delivery of goods into Armenia: food, fuel, and medical supplies. Armenian forces had to neutralize Azeri fire in Khojaly and terminate the blockade. The Azeri's goal of attacking and killing the Armenian people was very clearly deliberate.

Using loudspeakers for ten days, the Armenian forces announced to Khojaly inhabitants and Azeri forces that an attack was imminent. The announcements also informed Azeris that Armenians had dedicated a corridor for the safe passage of civilians to Azeri held areas. The Azeri authorities did nothing to facilitate the



evacuation of their people. On February 25, 1992, the Armenian self-defense forces attacked Khojaly. Several Azeri civilians tried to flee through the corridor; however, Azeri forces fired at the column, killing an unknown number. Although the Armenians were successful in neutralizing the Azeri fire- power, Khojaly remained in Azeri hands for many months. Soon after the attack, Azeri authorities claimed that Armenians had committed genocide. There is no evidence for their allegation.

The request that your office received has turned the incident into an anti-Armenian campaign. This anti-Armenian stance is a fresh wound for Armenians as they have very recently been attacked by the Azeri's, just as they were in 1992.

On September 27, 2020 Azerbaijan launched an unprovoked attack against the peaceful Republic of Artsakh by shelling military positions and innocent civilian populations indiscriminately. Turkey played an active role in supporting Azerbaijan's aggression toward Artsakh by providing arms, logistical and communications support, and even transporting paid Jihadist mercenaries to Azerbaijan from Libya and the Turkish Syrian border. Armenia was forced to make significant concessions at the conclusion of the war.

On November 9, 2020, a ceasefire was declared that called upon the mutual release and exchange of prisoners. Azerbaijan has not yet released the prisoners of war and innocent civilians that are being held captive. All persons were to be exchanged. Azerbaijan has a history of gruesome treatment and human rights violations of captives. So far, only 54 Armenians, both civilians and

soldiers have been returned from Azerbaijani custody while the number of missing Armenians continues to grow. Even after the ceasefire, Armenian soldiers have been captured and Azerbaijan has failed to acknowledge these soldiers as prisoners of war and want to try them in Azerbaijan on criminal charges. Azerbaijani soldiers are continuing to break the ceasefire and capture innocent Armenian soldiers and hold them as hostages only to unfairly extort political and territorial demands.

Furthermore, for more than a century, Turkey and Azerbaijan have maintained a violent history toward the Armenian people. Descendants of the Armenian Genocide continue to mourn the loss of 1.5 million ancestors murdered by the Turks and over 5,000 civilians and military personnel were killed in this conflict.

The California Armenian Legislative Caucus is a bi-partisan, non-political Caucus that encourages California Armenian Americans to advocate and participate in cultural, educational, governmental, and community efforts in California. Through advocacy, the Caucus strives to ensure that California Armenian Americans' voices are heard and given a platform. The Caucus serves as a forum for members from the California Senate and Assembly to identify key issues affecting Armenian Americans and develop and empower the Armenian American community throughout California.

Armenian-Americans have been crucial to the contributions in the history of the United States and California since the major wave of Armenian settlers came here in the late 1890s. Today, California is home to more Armenians than anywhere in the United States. The contributions of Armenians to California culture and history have been remarkable. Armenians have brought their intellect and work ethic to bear in a variety of fields including agriculture, energy, medicine, technology, the arts, government, and more. The Caucus strives to educate Californians on Armenian American issues and celebrate the achievements of Armenian Americans in California.

Azerbaijan unhappy with Armenia's plans to exhibit carpets from Shushi Museum, seeks UNESCO support

Azerbaijan has urged UNESCO to react to Armenia's plans to hold an exhibition of carpets from the Shushi Carpet Museum.

The country's Culture Ministry says the carpets were "illegally taken out of Shushi on November 1."

The Ministry claims Armenians have not been historically engaged in carpet weaving and describes the exhibition as "a manifestation of misappropriation."



Carpets made in Artsakh will go on display at the National Museum-Institute

of Architecture after Alexander Tamanyan on February 20.

The carpets are from the private collection of Vardan Astsatryan, founder of the Shushi Carpet Museum and were taken out of the city on November 1, 2020.

The oldest of the items to be exhibited is 350 years old.

The Shushi Carpet Museum was founded by Vardan Astsatryan in 2011 and opened its doors to public in 2013.

Armenia approves three Covid vaccines

Armenia will roll out the Covid vaccination in March 2021, Minister of Health Anahit Avanesyan told reporters after the cabinet meeting.

She said the vaccination will be carried out on voluntary basis. People in risk groups will be vaccinated free of charge, she said, adding that it's not yet clear what it will cost for others.

According to the Minister, the government will import only the vaccines that

have successfully passed phase 3 of clinical trials.

Three vaccines – AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Sputnik V – have so far been approved by an expert commission.

"With regard to Pfizer, there are issues pertaining to the required storage temperature, which need to be solved" Avanesyan said.

The amount of vaccines to be imported will depend on several factors, including

their cost and how much money the state can allocate for the purpose.



Azerbaijani forces continue firing near Armenian villages – Ombudsman



Azerbaijani servicemen continue firing from small and large-caliber weapons in the immediate vicinity of the villages of Kapan community, Armenia's Human Rights Defender Arman Tatoyan said after

a visit to the region.

According to him, the shootings are regular, both during the day and at night.

"They are clearly and unmistakably heard in the villages, causing anxiety, first of all to women and children," he said.

The Ombudsman says that due to the process of "determining" the borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the pastures, the private and community arable lands of the Kapan villages are being targeted by the Azerbaijani armed forces.

At the same time, he says, the Azer-

baijani servicemen are at such a distance (even less than 1 km) that the lands of the Armenian villagers are visible to the naked eye. In other words, they are clearly observing these civilians carrying out their daily chores and the agricultural work on their lands

The findings registered during the visit are being summarized by the Human Rights Defender's Office. Proposals will be submitted to the competent state bodies, and if necessary, clarifications will be sought to address each of the matters.

Orchestra Classique de Montréal to present Armenian songs in fundraising concert

Running from March 9 to 23, 2021, the Orchestre Classique de Montreal will present an online fundraising concert of Armenian music, titled “From Yerevan to Montreal,” *OperaWire* reports.

Led by Maestro Boris Brott, the concert will feature Armenian-Canadian soprano Aline Kutan. The program is comprised of works from Armenian composers Armen Tigranian and Kevork Andonian, as well as two works by composer and OCM founder Alexander Brott. There will be arias from Tigranian’s opera, “Anoush,” as well as the world premiere of Andonian’s composition, “Revival.”

“From Yerevan to Montreal” will be broadcast live from Salle Pierre-Mercure

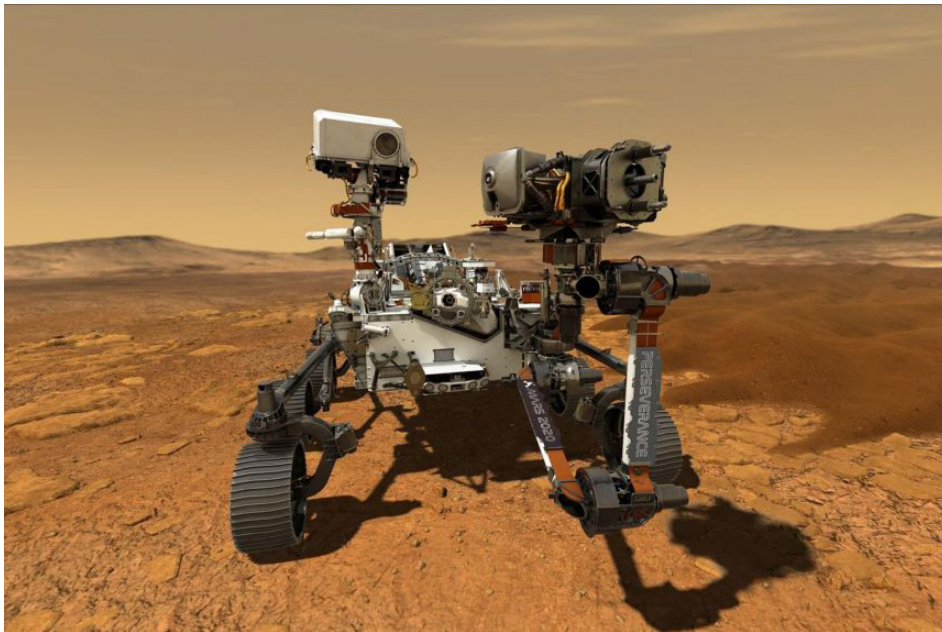


on March 9, and available for viewing until March 23.

Tickets are \$20 with a portion of the

proceeds going to the Atken Armenian Foundation in support of music programs for underprivileged children.

NASA’s Perseverance Rover safely lands on Mars



The largest, most advanced rover NASA has sent to another world touched down on Mars February 18, after a 203-day journey traversing 472 million kilometers, *NASA* confirms.

Packed with groundbreaking technology, the Mars 2020 mission launched July 30, 2020, from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in Florida. The Perseverance

rover mission marks an ambitious first step in the effort to collect Mars samples and return them to Earth.

“This landing is one of those pivotal moments for NASA, the United States, and space exploration globally – when we know we are on the cusp of discovery and sharpening our pencils, so to speak, to rewrite the textbooks,” said acting NASA

Administrator Steve Jurczyk.

About the size of a car, the 1,026-kilogram robotic geologist and astrobiologist will undergo several weeks of testing before it begins its two-year science investigation of Mars’ Jezero Crater.

While the rover will investigate the rock and sediment of Jezero’s ancient lakebed and river delta to characterize the region’s geology and past climate, a fundamental part of its mission is astrobiology, including the search for signs of ancient microbial life.

To that end, the Mars Sample Return campaign, being planned by NASA and ESA (European Space Agency), will allow scientists on Earth to study samples collected by Perseverance to search for definitive signs of past life using instruments too large and complex to send to the Red Planet.

Some 28 miles (45 kilometers) wide, Jezero Crater sits on the western edge of Isidis Planitia, a giant impact basin just north of the Martian equator. Scientists have determined that 3.5 billion years ago the crater had its own river delta and was filled with water.

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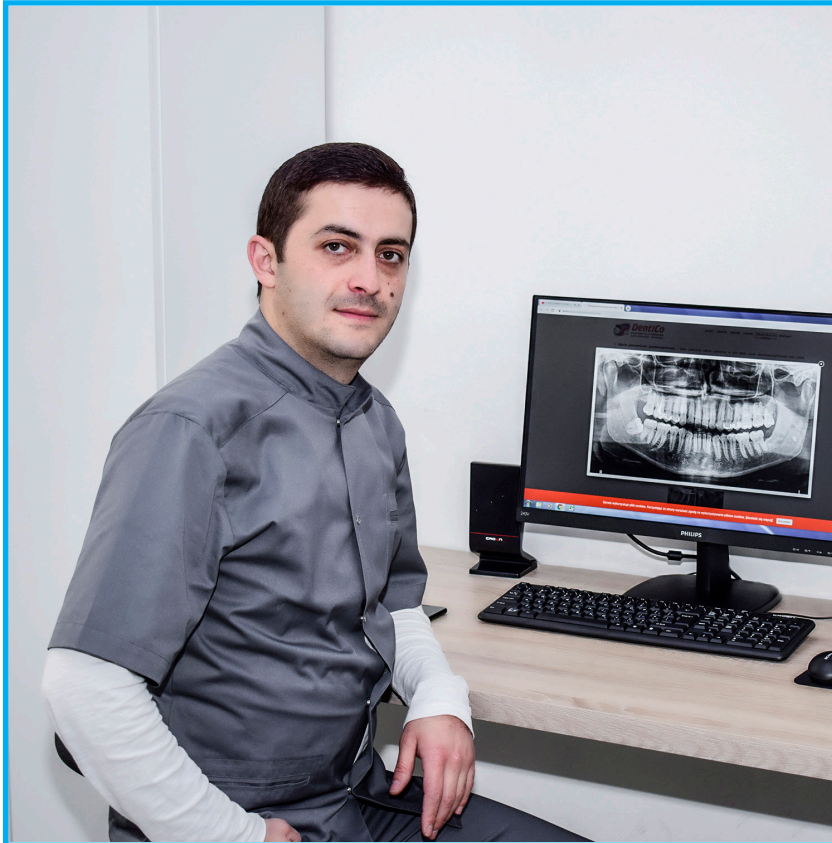
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