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A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Alcee L. Hastings".

**Statement by the Honorable Alcee L. Hastings on the Anniversaries of the Sumgait Pogrom
and Khojaly Massacre**

M. Speaker, I rise to mark two painful anniversaries this week in the decades-long conflict over the territory of Nagorno Karabakh. Although separated by four years and 200 miles, the Sumgait Pogrom in 1988 and Khojaly Massacre in 1992 both demonstrated the heinous potential of interethnic hatreds to tear apart communities and trample human dignity. The commemoration of these horrific events is an opportunity to reflect on the innocent lives lost in this ongoing conflict as well as a chance to affirm the need for urgent steps to heal these wounds and find peace for all those afflicted once and for all.

The Sumgait Pogrom occurred in the early days of the conflict between ethnic Armenians and Azeris over the semi-autonomous Soviet oblast of Nagorno Karabakh. At the time, the Armenian-majority region was self-governing but ensconced in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1988, a mass Armenian political movement sought to capitalize on administrative reforms in the Soviet Union to unite the territory with the Armenian state. This self-determination campaign quickly unmasked mutual suspicions and interethnic resentments that degenerated into violence.

Azeri counter-protests emerged in Baku in early February 1988 as ethnic tensions in Nagorno Karabakh intensified. Later that month, the reported murder of ethnic Azeris in Nagorno Karabakh lit a tinderbox of tensions that had built up in the town of Sumgait, 20 miles northwest of Baku. Gangs broke off from an Azeri rally in town and began looting, beating, raping, and murdering ethnic Armenians. Ethnic Azeris killed approximately 26 Armenians and injured hundreds more in the violence. The trauma of the pogrom sparked fears of escalating violence and led to the first major wave of relocations that eventually resulted in the near complete displacement of ethnic Armenians out of Azerbaijan and Azeris from Armenia.

Reciprocal atrocities coinciding with the collapse of the Soviet Union caused the outbreak of all-out war in the early 1990s. The Khojaly Massacre on February 26, 1992 is the single greatest loss of life in the history of the conflict, which continues to this day under a shaky ceasefire agreed in 1994. In the early morning hours, advancing Armenian fighters opened fire on a stream of mostly civilian Azeris fleeing the town of Khojaly in the Nagorno Karabakh region.

Although estimates vary, Armenian militiamen killed several hundred Azeri civilians in the snow-covered woods of Nagorno Karabakh that morning. All told, the Nagorno Karabakh War claimed approximately 20,000 lives and displaced more than a million people in both directions.

M. Speaker, as Chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, I am deeply familiar with the efforts that the United States, in partnership with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, has made over the past quarter-century to resolve this conflict. The United States is a co-chair alongside France and Russia in the trilateral Minsk Group process the OSCE established in the late 1990s to facilitate de-escalation and peace talks between the sides. This process has largely succeeded in keeping all-out war at bay for more than 20 years, but the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides bear responsibility for advancing the cause of peace, including by preparing their populations for a lasting resolution.

I am encouraged by the significant decrease in ceasefire violations over the past couple of years as well as the steady pace of high-level encounters between Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders during this period. Yet no meaningful progress has been made in these talks. Moreover, the Armenian Prime Minister and Azerbaijani President punctuate their private discussions with inflammatory public statements that often distort the historical record and damage the cause of peace.

M. Speaker, I strongly encourage the political leadership in Yerevan and Baku to use these solemn commemorations of Sumgait and Khojaly this week to turn a new page in this terrible conflict. The most fitting way to honor the lives of those lost would be through words of reconciliation and steps toward peace. Together, the peoples of Armenia and Azerbaijan can ensure such atrocities are never repeated and that future generations will know a life of secure and prosperous coexistence.