Speech by President Ilham Aliyev after raising the national flag of Azerbaijan in Khankendi (also referred to as Stepanakert)

Office of the President of Azerbaijan • 15 October 2023

[Transcribed from original by the Parley Policy Initiative]

Dear compatriots.

It is a historic day today. Today, the Azerbaijani flag was raised in the central square of the city of Khankendi. I sincerely congratulate all the people of Azerbaijan on this occasion.

Exactly 20 years ago, the people of Azerbaijan showed great confidence in me by electing me to the position of President in the presidential election. At that time, I addressed my people and promised that I would defend the national interests of the Azerbaijani people and the Azerbaijani state and that I would protect the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. I took an oath with my hand on the Constitution and the Holy Quran. I am glad that all the promises I made during the last 20 years and all the tasks I set before myself have been fulfilled.

Today, all the people of Azerbaijan are genuinely rejoicing, all the people of Azerbaijan are thanking Allah. We have been waiting for this day for more than 30 years. But each of us, I am sure, believed that this day would come.

Twenty years ago, when I started to fulfill my duties as President, I set myself the top priority task of raising the Azerbaijani flag in all our territories, all our lands, cities, and villages that were occupied at the time. Every day, every hour we moved towards this sacred goal. Every day, we were bringing this cherished moment closer and repeatedly saying that each of us should try to bring this day closer with our hard work.

Over these years, Azerbaijan has become stronger. Azerbaijan has been able to take its rightful place on the global scale. Azerbaijan is now being reckoned with in the world. The position of our country and the steps of our state carry a great meaning not only for the region but also for a broader geography. In many cases, Azerbaijan has been the author of important initiatives. Over the years, we have created a strong political and legal foundation for resolving the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. At the same time, we have created a strong economy, and the successes achieved in this direction over the past 20 years are obvious. Our economy has grown more than four times. A strong economy means independence. Independence should never be conditional. To achieve real independence, you must have a strong economy, you must have a strong army.

We worked tirelessly to strengthen our army. We have created such a strong army that the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan can honorably fulfill any task today, and we proved that

on the battlefield. We forced the enemy to sign the act of capitulation in just 44 days during the Patriotic War three years ago. At the same time, the anti-terror operation which we carried out last month and which lasted only 23 hours, showed our strength, and the enemy surrendered by waving the white flag. We are rightly proud of our Armed Forces.

The main reason we are here today is the people of Azerbaijan, the children of Azerbaijan. We have raised such a young generation that was ready to die for the Motherland, for our lands, and they were confronting death. May Allah have mercy on all our martyrs. We bow our heads to their souls. We, the people of Azerbaijan, are forever indebted to them. Three years ago, over the course of the last three years and during the anti-terror operation in September, Azerbaijani soldiers and officers showed true heroism, patriotism, and self-sacrifice. We are proud of our Army, and our Armed Forces. They are the source of our pride. Not only Azerbaijani citizens but also, I am sure, tens of millions of Azerbaijanis living in the world are rightly proud of Azerbaijani soldiers and officers, and the state of Azerbaijan.

The anti-terror operation last month was inevitable. The people of Azerbaijan know very well, and I am sure so does the world community, that we wanted to resolve the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict peacefully. For seventeen years, I personally participated in meaningless and fruitless negotiations many times. Why? Because I thought that this issue should be resolved peacefully. But gradually our hopes dwindled. Analyzing the occupying policy of Armenia once again, I can say with full confidence today that they had no intention of returning even an inch of land to us. Unfortunately, the mediators dealing with this issue actually wanted to freeze the conflict, to make the conflict eternal. They wanted this wound to never heal. The people and the state of Azerbaijan could never come to terms with this situation. I have said many times that we will never accept this situation, we will never allow a second Armenian state to be created on our land.

The Patriotic War lasted only 44 days. During all these days, I repeatedly addressed the people and, at the same time, addressed the enemy, urging it to lay down guns, and provide a timetable of when they would vacate our lands, and we are ready to stop the war. After we had liberated Shusha, our sacred hearth and the impregnable fortress, the enemy realized his defeat, waved the white flag, and we stopped the war.

I remember some people asking the question at that time: Why, why did we agree to stop the war on November 10? Today, while standing here, I want to reiterate that we have to do everything at the right time, and we do. The overwhelming majority of the Azerbaijani people understood perfectly well at that time, on November 10 and in the ensuing period, that we would achieve what we wanted. And what we wanted was the flag of Azerbaijan flying here.

The people of Azerbaijan showed great confidence in me 20 years ago, and over these years I have always felt it. And this confidence has further grown. Today, the words I said during the occupation and the words people have been repeating are the biggest rewards for me. I said back then that I knew how to do something and when to do it.

Even when the Second Karabakh War stopped, the people of Azerbaijan knew that I knew this. Less than three years have passed since that day, and we are here today, in Khankendi, in the center of Khankendi, standing under the Coat of Arms and the Flag of Azerbaijan. It is a great happiness and a historic event.

Perhaps it is not right for me to talk about history now because we lived this history. We created this history. The people of Azerbaijan won such a Victory that it has become known to all, and this Victory will be with us forever. This Victory will forever be in our history. The generations that will follow us will forever and rightfully be proud of this Victory.

This year is the "Year of Heydar Aliyev". We have been celebrating the 100th anniversary of Heydar Aliyev's birth throughout the year. How do we celebrate? We celebrate it by continuing his policy and honoring his historical heritage. I spent the Great Leader's birthday in Shusha. I know that some people were wondering where the ceremony would be held, who the speakers would be, and which foreign guests would attend. Then they realized that no ceremony would be held. Why? Because our respect for the memory of the Great Leader had to be measured by specific actions. This is the first. Secondly, Heydar Aliyev was a very modest person and was never fond of lavish ceremonies. I remember his 50th birthday very well. In 1973, we celebrated it at home only with the family. I also remember his 60th birthday too.

He was working in Moscow at the time. There were no guests there either. To celebrate his 70th birthday with my father, I went to Nakhchivan. And on his 80th birthday, his health was not so good anymore, we celebrated it in the hospital in Ankara, in the canteen of that hospital. This is why we had to celebrate my father's 100th birthday in Shusha, which has a great symbolic meaning for us and has a special place in the heart of every Azerbaijani. There, addressing the people of Azerbaijan, I expressed my heartfelt words. Today, the souls of the Great Leader and all those who didn't live to see this day are happy. All the people of Azerbaijan, their followers cheer their souls.

Of course, the fact that I came here today when we are celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Great Leader's birth, has a great symbolic meaning. I should also note that the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Province, which doesn't have a historical, geographical, or political basis in Azerbaijan, was established 100 years ago – in 1923. This is a history of 100 years. Notice how much our people have suffered over these 100 years and how many times history has put us to the test. We didn't bend, we didn't break, we confronted such an immense tragedy alone, and no one stood by us. When our lands were occupied, no country stood with us. They did not give us even moral support. All major powers were behind Armenia and today's history shows it once again. Look at the countries that are most hostile to Azerbaijan today.

These countries were next to Armenia at that time in 1992-1993, incited them to invade our territory, supported the invasion, and justified them. Nothing has changed in these 30 years. Our people were faced with great tragedies. One 1 million people were left homeless. Our lands were completely destroyed. Today, every visitor to the liberated lands can see Armenian savagery with their own eyes. There is not a single sound

building left here. Ethnic cleansing has been carried out against us. Genocide was committed against us, the Khojaly genocide. More than a dozen countries have recognized Khojaly as an act of genocide. The movement called “Justice for Khojaly!” has become international scope. The road we have covered from that difficult period to this day is one of honor and dignity. We united and gathered strength. The people of Azerbaijan showed their wisdom once again in 1993, supported the Great Leader Heydar Aliyev, elected him to the post of President, and have been on the path of development ever since. In the last 20 years, this development has been even faster and is manifested in all areas.

This building was constructed in the 1960s, at the expense of the Azerbaijani budget. At that time, it was the building of the party committee of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Province. It was called the Partcom building. Many people used to sit in this building. There was a time when the Azerbaijanis and Armenians lived here in a friendly atmosphere. There was a time when the Azerbaijanis and Armenians lived in friendship not only in Khankendi but also in Karabakh, Baku, Ganja, Yerevan, Goycha, Zangezur, Daralayaz, Basarkechar. I remember those years. After Heydar Aliyev came to power in Soviet Azerbaijan, some nationalist forces that had existed in Karabakh until then completely withdrew. Exactly 18 years. From 1969 to 1982, there was not a single unpleasant incident. I remember coming here with my father. I remember that atmosphere. Here, there was a friendly atmosphere in the true sense of the word. Work was being done together. Today, we raised the Azerbaijani flag over the Sarsang reservoir. The Sarsang Reservoir and the Sugovushan Reservoir were built on Heydar Aliyev’s initiative in 1976. At that time, so much investment was made in the development of agriculture in the region. A railway was built from Aghdam to Khankendi, a higher school was established here, and most of the buildings you see in Khankendi were constructed in those years. Agriculture was developing. At that time, the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Province alone supplied 100,000 tons of grapes.

All this was a source of income for those working in collective farms and state farms at the time. People lived well here. There was no discrimination. To confirm these words, I can give you an example. At that time, the party committee of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Province had a nine-member bureau. Eight of them were Armenians and one was Azerbaijani, and he was the first secretary of the Shusha City Party Committee. So if there was discrimination, then what does this example show? The first secretary is Armenian, the chairman of the executive committee is Armenian, and so were all other officials. There was no discrimination here at all. In Azerbaijan, a newspaper was published in the Armenian language, i.e. it was in those years, and we can’t simply leave those years aside. On the contrary, those who remember those years should share those memories with the younger generation. Because this was the case, but what happened next? In 1987, Heydar Aliyev was removed from his position, and removed from the bureau of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He was also removed from the position of the first deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union. Hardly had two weeks passed when Armenian nationalists raised the issue of transferring the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Province from Azerbaijan to Armenia. It was raised by an Armenian nationalist who lived in Moscow. Where was this issue

raised? In a French newspaper. France again. So today, when we return to that history and analyze those events, we can see again that nothing happened by chance. Unfortunately, the then-Azerbaijani leadership let the situation spiral out of control, and showed cowardice, helplessness, and indecision. As a matter of fact, nationalists occupied this place, so many rallies with anti-Azerbaijani slogans were held in this square, and all this encouraged the nationalists even more. Armenian nationalists, Dashnaks, and bloodthirsty international terrorists were constantly coming here from Armenia. It was here that the policy of ethnic cleansing against our people began. Those sitting in this building in those years were the cause of the tragedies of Armenian and Azerbaijani peoples. Azerbaijan was left without Heydar Aliyev for only six years, and those six years remained in our history as a tragic, critical, and shameful period for us. Our lands were occupied, and anti-national governments replacing each other only tried to protect their personal interests, both during the Soviet period and during independence. In particular, as a result of the treacherous activities of the Popular Front-Musavat anti-national duo, this entire territory was occupied, and then they allegedly froze their positions and cowardly withdrew.

And again, the genius of Heydar Aliyev, his personality, and the Heydar Aliyev factor came to the aid of the Azerbaijani people, and we rightly refer to the Great Leader as the Savior. At that time, the state independence of Azerbaijan could have been lost.

Some of those sitting in the highest post in this building are now in Baku. They wanted to come to Baku, they threatened us, they said that their tanks would be on the streets of Baku, and they were right. Their tanks are in the Military Trophy Park. They said that they would come to Baku to have tea. And they are right in this too. They are having tea now, in the detention center. The three clowns who called themselves “president” were sitting here and challenging us, threatening and insulting us. We approached this issue with restraint and patience, as we do with everything else. Because we knew that we would come here. I knew that. Exactly 20 years ago, on October 15, 2003, I made that promise to the people of Azerbaijan and myself. Yes, we waited for 20 years, or rather for 17 years. Three years ago, our flag was raised in Shusha. However, we have achieved what we wanted and fulfilled the decades-long wishes of the Azerbaijani people. We have restored the dignity of the Azerbaijani people. We have returned to our lands, we have restored our territorial integrity, and at the same time, we have restored our dignity.

The three clowns who used to sit here and call themselves “president” are waiting for their deserved punishment today. I wonder if the man who used to sit in one of these buildings and call himself “prime minister” will dare to threaten us again now? His tea is being served in the detention center too now. A separatist who called himself “foreign minister” sarcastically said that if Azerbaijan wanted to raise its flag in Khankendi, it should open an embassy in our country. Now his tea is served there as well, in the detention center. Our flag is here. This should be a lesson to them. Unfortunately, the words I said 20 years ago and repeated many times did not register with them. They thought those were just words. No, I do what I say, everyone knows it, including Armenia, and they should not forget it either. Don't forget the Patriotic War! Don't

forget the anti-terror operation! If some forces in Armenia ever think about revenge, let them take a good look at these images.

Dear compatriots, standing in this square today is a great happiness, a great joy, and a source of pride. I proudly raised the Azerbaijani flag today, and I want to say again to my dear people that we deserve this Victory. The people of Azerbaijan achieved this victory at the cost of their blood and lives. The Flag I raised here today will fly here forever and we will live here forever. Karabakh is ours, Karabakh is Azerbaijan!

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