

# Proposal for a Regional Emergency Action Partnership (REAP) for Peace in the South Caucasus

A joint policy brief by experts from Armenia and Azerbaijan

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## Introduction

Armenia and Azerbaijan, together with Georgia, are facing unprecedented challenges that arise from unfolding climate change and seismic risk in the South Caucasus. Placing considerable strain on economies, livelihoods, and government resources, these hazards can significantly worsen the complex geopolitical landscape and exacerbate unresolved political issues. The absence of structured and coordinated disaster response mechanisms can increase vulnerability and hamper effective crisis management, leading to avoidable loss of life, widespread suffering, and significant economic damage.

We propose the establishment of a Regional Emergency Action Partnership (REAP) in the form of a coordinated binational disaster response system. This system could enable better preparation and facilitate effective responses to disasters that are likely to have an impact across borders, ultimately saving lives through joint efforts and resource mobilisation. Including Georgia would further strengthen such a crisis management system and solidify regional cooperation.

Furthermore, this mechanism could help catalyse political rapprochement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Natural disasters and humanitarian crises can bring adversarial states together and unexpectedly foster collaboration. Greece and Türkiye have engaged in “earthquake diplomacy”,<sup>1</sup> and despite the lack of diplomatic relations, Armenia and Türkiye briefly reopened their border to facilitate aid during the devastating 2023 Turkish earthquake (see Case Study 1 for more information). This rare example of earthquake diplomacy demonstrates how countries in seismically active regions can share common threats and opportunities for cooperation in their disaster responses. Similarly, Israel, Jordan, and Palestine have conducted joint disaster-response exercises involving 400 firefighters, medical personnel, and first responders<sup>2</sup>, and the United States and Western states extended considerable support to the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the 1988 Armenian earthquake.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> K. Bali, “Turkey and Greece Revive Earthquake Diplomacy”, *Deutsche Welle*, 2 July 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-and-greece-engage-in-earthquake-diplomacy/a-64635547>.

<sup>2</sup> K. Ahmed, “Israel, Jordan, Palestine Hold Disaster-Response Drills”, *Anadolu Ajansı*, 24 October 2017, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/israel-jordan-palestine-hold-disaster-response-drills/946578>.

<sup>3</sup> UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs, *USSR Earthquake Dec 1988 UNDRO Situation Reports 1-14 - Armenia* | *ReliefWeb*, 8 December 1988, <https://reliefweb.int/report/armenia/ussr-earthquake-dec-1988-undro-situation-reports-1-14>.



## Case study 1: Earthquake diplomacy – some successful examples

### Armenia-Türkiye

Shortly following the 6 February 2023 magnitude 7.8 and 7.6 earthquakes, an Armenian search and rescue team was formed to find survivors in Adiyaman, Türkiye. The crew was deployed to Kahramanmaraş, Kilis, Diyarbakır, Adana, Osmaniye, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Adiyaman, Malatya and other provinces.

The search and rescue team was sent to Türkiye despite the absence of diplomatic relations between the two countries, and for this purpose the border between Armenia and Türkiye was reopened for a few days. Armenian rescuers saved many lives, and their engagement was appreciated by both Turkish society and the state – many local civilians approached them to express their gratitude and were surprised to learn that help had come from Armenia.<sup>4</sup>

Armenian-Turkish relations have been hostile for more than a century. Notably, the last officially recorded passage across the Alican-Margara bridge prior to the earthquake had taken place in 1988, when humanitarian aid was brought from Türkiye to the victims of an earthquake in northern Armenia.

### India-Pakistan

Despite their long-standing political tensions, India and Pakistan have also managed to cooperate through disaster diplomacy. Past natural disasters, such as the 2001 Gujarat earthquake and the 2005 Kashmir earthquake led to mutual aid and dialogue,<sup>5</sup> and even resulted in summits. However, cooperation has often been sporadic, hindered by political rivalry, with India's self-sufficient disaster relief policy sometimes preventing joint efforts. For example, India declined international aid after the 2004 tsunami and rejected Pakistan's offers of assistance after the 2005 earthquake. Similarly, during the 2020 floods in Pakistan, India's US\$5 million offer of aid was declined. Nevertheless, climatic events like Cyclone Biparjoy in 2023 have underscored the need for joint responses, even though the countries' isolated approaches reflected entrenched rivalries. However, mechanisms such as the Indus Waters Treaty, which is managed by the Permanent Indus Commission, demonstrate that cooperation is possible in less contentious areas, like environmental issues.

<sup>4</sup> <https://massispost.com/2023/02/armenian-rescuers-complete-their-mission-in-turkey/>; <https://en.armradio.am/2023/02/17/armenian-rescuers-complete-mission-in-turkey-return-home/>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/cooperation-between-india-and-pakistan-after-natural-disasters>.



While challenges remain, these historical examples suggest that disaster relief and environmental management cooperation could foster peace and reconciliation.

However, a proactive binational disaster response system between states that have recently become adversarial is rare. As one such mechanism, REAP could demonstrate the goodwill and collaborative capacity of the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments. It would incentivise tangible support from international actors invested in peace and prosperity in the South Caucasus and serve as a model for former adversaries worldwide.

## Context

Climate change is an escalating global crisis. Based on the alarming findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2023, the UN Secretary-General warned that we have only six years to prevent vast and irreversible damage from climate change.

Azerbaijan faces significant risks from floods, earthquakes, landslides, droughts and extreme temperatures. Between 1990 and 2016 floods were the most common disaster the country experienced, making up 46% of incidents, followed by earthquakes at 33%. Flooding causes annual economic losses estimated at US\$18–25 million due to land degradation and soil damage.<sup>6</sup> Droughts, which are becoming more frequent, have also led to severe impacts, such as the 2014 forest fires that damaged 59 hectares of forest.

These natural disasters have a heavy negative impact on the population and economy. According to official reports, between 1995 and 2012 the number of people negatively affected by natural disasters in Azerbaijan was more than two million (about 20% of the population), and the total damage was estimated at more than US\$370 million.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, according to the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, a major earthquake with a 250-year return period could cost US\$40 billion (71% of Azerbaijan's real gross domestic product in 2022) and affect three million people or 34% of the population.

The situation in Armenia is equally serious.<sup>8</sup> Over the past few decades, urbanisation and changing climatic conditions have increased economic losses, undermining the country's sustainable socio-economic development. According to official reports, after the 1988 Armenian earthquake that killed more than 25,000 people and cost at least US\$8 billion, between 1997 and 2024 a total of more than 430,000 people were affected by natural disasters, which

<sup>6</sup> Climate Change Knowledge Portal, "Azerbaijan", World Bank, 2021a, <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/azerbaijan/vulnerability>.

<sup>7</sup> CRED (Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters), "EM-DAT: The International Disaster Database", Dataset, Brussels, CRED and UCLouvain, 2024, [www.emdat.be](http://www.emdat.be).

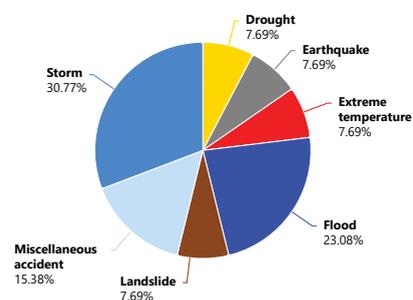
<sup>8</sup> UNDRR (UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction), "Risk Spotlight Common Country Analysis: Armenia", 27 May 2024, <https://www.undrr.org/publication/risk-spotlight-common-country-analysis-armenia>.



cost an estimated US\$336 million in damage.<sup>9</sup> For the approximately 30% of the Armenian workforce employed in agriculture,<sup>10</sup> the increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events threaten to destabilize livelihoods, potentially pushing thousands of people into poverty.<sup>11</sup>

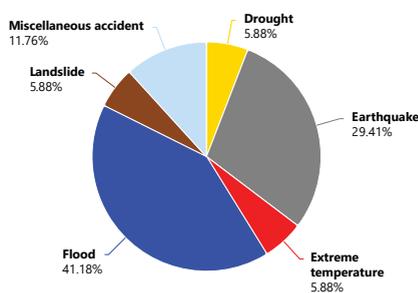
The pie charts below show the average annual natural hazard occurrence in the period 1980-2020 for Armenia and Azerbaijan. Floods are identified as one of the most critical and frequent threats for both countries. Given their significant impact, it is crucial to focus on flood management in addition to addressing earthquakes, which are also a major concern due to their potential severity and ability to cause serious damage.

Average Annual Natural Hazard Occurrence for 1980-2020



Armenia<sup>12</sup>

Average Annual Natural Hazard Occurrence for 1980-2020



Azerbaijan<sup>13</sup>

The global climate crisis has reached a point where mitigation alone is insufficient to counter increasing threats, and adaptation has now become a policy imperative. This shift is driven by undeniable data showing that climate change is no longer a distant threat, but a present and growing issue.<sup>14</sup> To address the challenges ahead effectively, coordinated bilateral, regional and international support is essential.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Climate Change Knowledge Portal, “Armenia”, World Bank, 2021b, <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/armenia/vulnerability>.

<sup>10</sup> International Trade Administration, “Armenia – Country Commercial Guide”, US Department of Commerce, 29 November 2023, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/armenia-agriculture>.

<sup>11</sup> I. Rucevska et al., “Climate Change and Security in the South Caucasus Republic of Armenia, Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia: Regional Assessment”, 2017, <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/2390304/climate-change-and-security-in-the-south-caucasus-republic-of-armenia-republic-of-azerbaijan-and-georgia/3411543/>.

<sup>12</sup> Climate Change Knowledge Portal, 2021b.

<sup>13</sup> Climate Change Knowledge Portal, 2021a.

<sup>14</sup> IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), *AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023*, New York, United Nations, 2023, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

## Case Study 2: The European Civil Protection Mechanism

Apart from spontaneous aid and cooperation in these circumstances, there are also established response mechanisms at the regional level that are worth studying. These experiences could inspire similar tools or systems in the South Caucasus. Initiated in 2001, the European Civil Protection Mechanism for disaster response facilitates a coordinated approach to disaster management<sup>16</sup> with its key components including a collective pool that can be mobilised quickly in response to emergencies, regular joint training exercises, the development of common procedures for efficient collaboration, and mutual aid, which allows for the rapid deployment of assistance with streamlined procedures for cross-border support. The Visegrad Group and the Baltic states also offer useful models, incorporating mutual assistance frameworks and joint disaster-response initiatives to improve response capabilities.

A closer study of the cases presented in Case Study 2 shows that most – if not all – of them established their response mechanisms many years after regional integration had occurred. In contrast, Armenia and Azerbaijan face a unique opportunity: creating a coordinated earthquake response system could also serve as one of the initial steps toward political rapprochement and regional integration. This initiative could lay the groundwork for increased trust and symbolise a willingness to move beyond conflict by acting as a catalyst for broader cooperation.

Currently, the bilateral relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan are limited, and focus primarily on areas like organised crime within the frameworks of the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation<sup>17</sup>. However, the growing risks of natural disasters present an opportunity to expand their collaboration into the area of disaster management. To this effect, we propose establishing a Regional Emergency Action Partnership (REAP), a coordinated regional disaster response system.

By addressing shared vulnerabilities such as floods and earthquakes in REAP, Armenia and Azerbaijan, together with Georgia, could turn these challenges into opportunities to build trust and foster regional stability. This cooperation would not only enhance their resilience to climate change, but could also lay the groundwork for broader peacebuilding efforts. The focus should be on developing resilient and cooperative structures for emergency response, demonstrating that even states with histories of conflict can find effective solutions when they recognise common threats from natural and environmental disasters.

<sup>16</sup> [https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/civil-protection/eu-civil-protection-mechanism\\_en](https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/civil-protection/eu-civil-protection-mechanism_en).

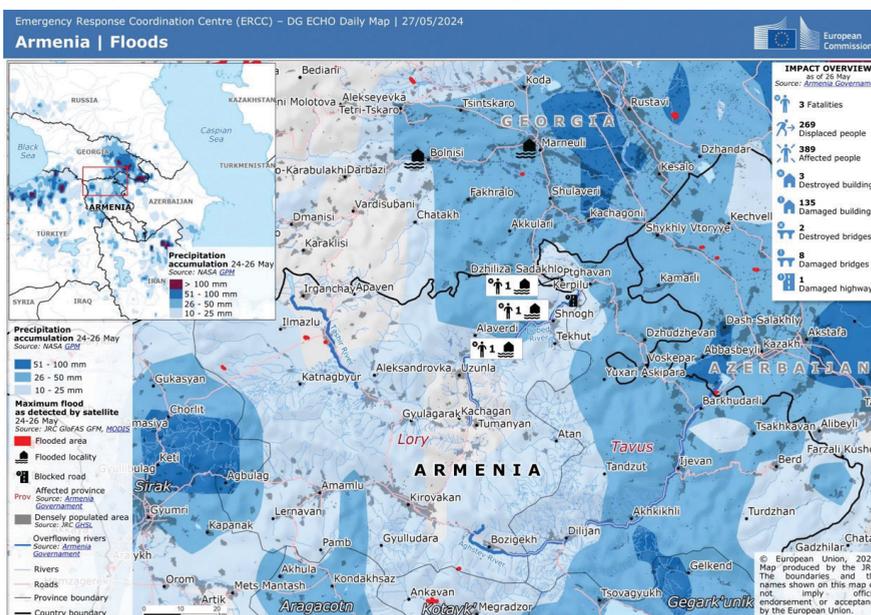
<sup>17</sup> BSEC (Black Sea Economic Cooperation), “Emergency Assistance”, 2018, <https://www.bsec-organization.org/areas-of-cooperation/emergency-assistance>.



## Scenario A: Flood

On 26 May 2024 a severe flash flood hit the Lori and Tavush regions in Armenia, affecting at least 15 villages and causing extensive damage to infrastructure, homes, livestock, and businesses. With a combined population of over 30,000 people living in these villages, the effects were significant. Immediate cross-border cooperation with Azerbaijan is crucial, especially given the proximity of the affected areas to Azerbaijani regions, highlighting the need for a coordinated response.

Map 1: May 2024 floods in Armenia bordering Azerbaijan



© European Union, 2024. Map produced by the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre (JRC)

Map 1 illustrates the proximity of the flood disaster zone in the Lori and Tavush provinces of Armenia to neighbouring regions in Azerbaijan. This recent flood serves as a compelling case study for the urgent need for cross-border cooperation.

### Before a crisis

To effectively address this pressing issue, several strategic measures could be implemented within the REAP framework.

Firstly, establishing a dedicated **mobile task force** endorsed by high-level officials from both Armenia and Azerbaijan is essential for the effective coordination and



mobilisation of resources. This approach, inspired by successful frameworks from other regions, could enhance the management of cross-border disaster responses.

Additionally, **creating standardised communication channels**, such as SMS alerts, is crucial for providing clear instructions to populations during floods. These alerts should include guidance on appropriate clothing, actions to take, locations to evacuate to, and essential items to pack. Adapting disaster communication guidelines from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)<sup>18</sup> will help ensure consistent and effective messaging on both sides of the border.

The establishment of a **joint information centre (JIC)** is another key measure. This centre would manage early warnings, provide timely updates, counter misinformation and correct false information. By issuing statements coordinated between the two countries, the JIC would play a critical role in maintaining public trust and ensuring the accurate flow of information during crises.

Furthermore, **sharing emergency contact information** among relevant services on both sides of the border is vital. This initiative would streamline communication and coordination, thereby facilitating more efficient joint operations. The guidelines from the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>19</sup> on establishing contact points in emergencies can serve as a valuable reference.

While recognising the possible sensitivities, **coordinating transport assets** would also improve the prospects for effective disaster response. Developing mechanisms to ensure the swift deployment of transport resources, such as rescue helicopters, would enable the closest available assets to be mobilised quickly. The European Civil Protection Mechanism<sup>20</sup> offers models for this kind of coordination that could be adapted to this scenario.

Finally, **implementing hospital-to-hospital hotlines** or coordinating mechanisms between health ministries would facilitate patient transfers during cross-border health crises. Additionally, setting up field hospitals or mobile medical units near the border would provide immediate care to affected populations. The experience of the IFRC in establishing mobile hospitals in disaster zones can be leveraged for this purpose.

## Challenges and potential solutions

Apart from these proposed measures, a number of challenges would still have to be addressed in light of the complex political relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan. One significant issue would be managing any potential **foreign**

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<sup>18</sup> IFRC (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies), *International First Aid, Resuscitation, and Education Guidelines*, 2020, <https://www.ifrc.org/document/international-first-aid-resuscitation-and-education-guidelines>.

<sup>19</sup> WHO (World Health Organization), *WHO Guidance on Preparing for National Response to Health Emergencies and Disasters*, 2021, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240037182>.

<sup>20</sup> European Commission, "Civil Protection", n.d., accessed 24 September 2024, [https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/civil-protection\\_en](https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/civil-protection_en).



**involvement**, including military support that may be offered to assist in the crisis. This necessitates clear protocols to ensure coordinated and effective assistance. Establishing these protocols is crucial to maintaining order and avoiding conflicts during the response, and it may have to be addressed by Baku and Yerevan on a case-by-case basis.

Additionally, **bureaucratic bottlenecks**, such as delays caused by the need for high-level coordination before lower-level teams can act, must be eliminated. Streamlining communication channels and pre-establishing response protocols could help to mitigate these delays and enhance the speed of a response.

**Distrust** between the responding nations, particularly concerning operations on each other's territory, also presents a challenge. Building trust through joint exercises ("dry runs") and prior collaborations could help to address this issue and improve cooperation.

**Language barriers** between local authorities from Armenia and Azerbaijan also need to be managed. Employing translators or developing bilingual communication materials could facilitate effective dialogue and coordination, ensuring that both sides could work together seamlessly.

Building crisis management capabilities is also addressed in the newly developed International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 22361:2022<sup>21</sup> framework on crisis management. This ISO standard provides a roadmap for initial crisis management planning and could potentially be used to strengthen crisis resilience and preparedness between the two countries.

In summary, an effective cross-border flood response between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Aras River Basin requires a comprehensive approach that includes coordination, communication, and cooperation. By addressing the above challenges, leveraging existing models and frameworks, and aligning efforts with broader climate change strategies, both countries could enhance their preparedness and response capabilities. This approach will not only mitigate the immediate impact of the flood, but also build a foundation for future collaboration in managing natural disasters.

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<sup>21</sup>ISO (International Organization for Standardization), "ISO 22361:2022: Security and Resilience – Crisis Management – Guidelines", 2022, <https://www.iso.org/standard/50267.html>.



## Scenario B: Earthquake

To address earthquake preparedness, similar measures as those used for flood response should be applied, emphasising the importance of proactive steps before disasters occur.

One essential measure is the clear **assignment of roles** by designating specific individuals or teams to manage earthquake response efforts. **Sharing emergency contacts** is also vital, including both contact information and well-defined roles to enhance coordination. The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction stresses the importance of establishing communication channels and sharing responsibilities to improve preparedness.<sup>22</sup>

Developing a **coordinated earthquake response mechanism** in the region would enable the swift mobilisation of resources to reduce casualties and infrastructure damage. Such a mechanism would facilitate the provision of immediate assistance and efficient resource allocation. Establishing pre-defined protocols and procedures would help address the unique needs of each country, and developing agreed procedures for opening borders during emergencies, as the WHO recommends,<sup>23</sup> would significantly facilitate the rapid movement of aid.

A bilateral mechanism may encounter limitations in terms of resource availability and expertise. By adopting a **regional approach** that includes Georgia, a broader and more resilient disaster response framework could be established, enhancing the diversity of available resources. Given the influence of political decisions during a disaster, Georgia's participation could prove especially beneficial, because it has the potential to serve as a mediator or "pressure valve" between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Georgia's established history of facilitating dialogue and providing logistical support further underscores its role as a trusted partner in the region.

The **systematic sharing of seismic information** would also strengthen regional response, because a collaborative seismic centre that includes neighbouring countries could improve coordination and resource management.<sup>24</sup> For example, recent data published on earthquakes in the Armenia-Azerbaijan border area underscores the need for enhanced cooperation.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> UNDRR, "Azerbaijan Risk Spotlight for Common Country Analysis (CCA)", 2023, <https://www.undrr.org/media/96808/download?startDownload=20241127>.

<sup>23</sup> WHO, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Currently, seismic centres in Armenia and Azerbaijan, such as the Armenian Seismic Network and the Republican Seismic Survey Centre of Azerbaijan, provide data on earthquake forecasts and magnitudes.

<sup>25</sup> News.am, "Earthquake Registered in the Border Zone of Armenia and Azerbaijan", 7 May 2024, <https://news.am/eng/news/822003.html>.



**Learning from international models** like the European Civil Protection Mechanism<sup>26</sup> could provide valuable insights into effective disaster response. Additionally, international organisations like the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the IFRC, could offer critical technical **assistance and resources** that may exceed the capabilities of national governments. However, their involvement usually requires a formal request from the affected countries, highlighting the importance of clear and coordinated communication.

Lastly, **joint simulation and training exercises** are essential for maintaining preparedness and coordination.<sup>27</sup> Regular drills, along with a shared resource pool of emergency supplies, medical equipment, and specialised teams, would enable the rapid deployment of aid. For example, Armenia and Azerbaijan could assist each other in the event of a major earthquake, with Georgia acting as a logistical hub to facilitate and streamline support.

## Conclusions

Armenia and Azerbaijan have established important measures and resources for disaster preparedness, with both countries having independently developed protocols and systems through their respective government ministries that deal with emergency responses to disasters. They also have early warning systems and emergency response teams in place; however, significant gaps remain in their cross-border disaster-related coordination. To address these gaps, several key steps must be taken to establish a robust, collaborative disaster response platform.

**Official endorsement** is a major priority. Formal approval would be needed from both governments to establish and activate this framework through agreements or memorandums of understanding. This step must be reinforced by **proactive political and diplomatic engagement** to secure high-level commitment, address potential political challenges, and ensure alignment with broader diplomatic objectives.

Once political-level approval is secured, **raising awareness** is essential. Publicising the proposed platform and explaining its necessity to a cautious public on either side could serve to rally both public support and engagement from key stakeholders in each country. Following this, a **joint task force** should be established, bringing together national experts from both countries who could design detailed emergency plans and protocols specifically tailored for cross-border cooperation. A neutral outside party could serve as a facilitator for the dialogue needed to construct such a mechanism.

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<sup>26</sup> European Commission, n.d.

<sup>27</sup> IFRC, Homepage, n.d., <https://www.ifrc.org/>.



**Leveraging expertise** from individuals with a history of bilateral cooperation and integrating international best practices will further strengthen the response plan. Additionally, sustained **support for a dialogue platform** will facilitate continuous discussions, promote coordination, and bridge gaps between stakeholders across both nations.

To build skills, test protocols, and foster cross-border teamwork, **joint training and exercises** should be organised, particularly for rescue teams operating in disaster-prone border areas. Lastly, once political approval is in place, effective **resource sharing** and **coordination mechanisms** should be developed, enabling the efficient distribution and utilisation of critical assets such as transport facilities and medical resources across borders in times of crisis.

In summary, while Armenia and Azerbaijan each have disaster response structures in place, enhancing both countries' capacities to effectively respond to disasters requires that they develop a more cohesive and collaborative approach. By securing government support, raising awareness, forming a joint task force, leveraging expertise, and implementing practical measures like joint training and resource coordination, both nations (with the involvement of Georgia) could enhance their disaster preparedness and through this relatively small yet critical and life-saving step build towards long-term regional stability.

# Building Peace Together

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