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The National Womb

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IN 2008, the de facto government in Nagorno-Karabakh, a disputed region in the southern Caucasus, introduced a “birth encouragement program,” which distributes cash payments to newlyweds for each newborn, with the aim of repopulating the region more than a decade after a devastating war.

The conflict started in 1988 and escalated into full-scale war when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and Nagorno-Karabakh’s ethnic Armenians went to war with Azerbaijan, with backing from neighboring Armenia. The war left 65,000 ethnic Armenians and 40,000 ethnic Azeris displaced. The Muslim Azeri population never returned, and neither did many of the Armenians who had fled. While a cease-fire was declared in May 1994 and the violence abated, there has not yet been a peace settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

On Sept. 2, Nagorno-Karabakh celebrated 20 years of independence, though it remains unrecognized by the international community. Life is not easy in the republic. Unemployment is high, salaries are low, opportunities are few; the young continue to leave in search of better futures abroad.

Since its introduction four years ago, the “birth encouragement program” has been credited for an increase in births, to 2,694 in 2010 from 2,145 in 2007. The program pays each couple about \$780 at their wedding, and then an additional \$260 for the first baby born, \$520 for the second, \$1,300 for the third and \$1,820 for the fourth. Families with six or more children under the age of 18 are given a house. These payments are quite substantial in a region where the average monthly salary is \$50.

Payments are being made efficiently, and the support is accessible to everyone. All of those I spoke to seemed happy and grateful for the money. However, there are questions, yet to be answered, about the long-term effects of encouraging so many young women to become mothers. In a region as economically deprived as Nagorno-Karabakh, is the solution simply to increase the birthrate? Without first improving education, infrastructure and employment opportunities for future generations, and raising the standard of living, the children of today’s baby boom may grow up to leave in search of better lives abroad, just like the youths of today.

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http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2011/12/11/opinion/sunday/20111211_EXPOSURES.html?ref=sunday#1