

18 November 2015

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Armenia must hold accountable, those responsible for threatening human rights defenders

Mr President, Mr Prosecutor General, Ms Minister, Mr Chief of the Police,

We, the undersigned members and partners of the Human Rights House Network (HRHN), condemn the threats and attacks against human rights defenders in Armenia, and call upon the Armenian authorities to publicly voice their support to such human rights defenders and hold those responsible accountable.

On 17 and 18 October 2015, the Armenian NGO Public Information and Need of Knowledge (PINK), a member of the Human Rights House Yerevan, organised the first Armenian LGBT forum, called “Rainbow.” The aim of the forum was to build an LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) movement in Armenia, discuss problems of LGBT people and together develop a strategy and steps to prevent homophobia and promote human rights for all in Armenia.¹ Around 40 people took part in the event. The forum took place in the province of Lori.

Since information about this event was posted, especially on PINK’s Armenia website², the people who are pictured have been targeted in attacks on social media and in offline platforms. These people are being

¹ More information on the event available at <http://www.pinkarmenia.org/en/2015/10/lgbt-forum>.

² <http://www.pinkarmenia.org>.

insulted, and threatened to be burnt, and killed. Worryingly, there are also cases of discriminatory statements and hate speech from politicians. We, in this regard, strongly condemn the declarations of the Mayor of Vanadzor, which amount to incitement to violence against participants to the forum and more generally against any LGBT rights defender.

The participants to the “Rainbow” forum assembled to discuss and develop means to protect and promote human rights of LGBT people in Armenia, and in doing so, were exercising their right to freedom of assembly.

These worrying events have, to date, not been met by an appropriate answer from the authorities:

- Firstly, according to information from member NGOs of the Human Rights House Yerevan, no action has been taken by the Office of the Prosecutor General to investigate these threats and to bring the perpetrators to justice, in application of Armenian legislation and Armenia’s obligations under European and international human rights law. If such actions are not taken immediately, the Office of the Prosecutor General would be creating *de facto* impunity for authors of written and verbal attacks, public incitement to violence and hatred against human rights defenders;
- Secondly, no authority in the country has publicly voiced its support to the attacked human rights defenders, in violation of Armenia’s responsibilities to protect human rights defenders. In accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 22/6, as an essential component of ensuring the protection of human rights defenders, States must acknowledge publicly the important and legitimate role of human rights defenders in the promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.³ This is even more important when such defenders are threatened and attacked.

We are concerned that these most recent attacks against participants to the “Rainbow” forum are unfortunately not a unique occurrence. In our letter of 13 September 2013, we alerted the Armenian authorities to attacks against organisations working on gender issues, especially the Women Resource Centre Armenia (WRCA), another member of the Human Rights House Yerevan.⁴ WRCA has been victim to concrete threats and the subject of several statements calling for violence, such as “blow up the Women’s Resource Centre”, and “burn the women’s human rights defenders” for raising gender issues and challenging gender stereotypes in the society. Such public calls inciting to discrimination, hostility and violence are particularly worrying after the firebombing of the DIY bar in May 2012.

Although human rights defenders are repeatedly targeted in Armenia, the Armenian authorities remain silent. Through this silence, and by lack of judicial and political action against perpetrators of such acts, the Armenian authorities create an unacceptable climate of impunity for those attacking human rights defenders, in violation of Armenia’s legislation and the State’s obligations under European and international human rights law.

At the occasion of the International Day against Homophobia on 17 May 2015, PINK wrote in this regard to all members of the Armenian Parliament, relevant ministries, and the offices of the Prime Minister and the President. PINK called upon the state officials to monitor direct and indirect cases of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, to ensure the legislative amendments to combat discrimination based on SOGI, thus ensuring equal rights and respect towards LGBT people and protecting them from the kind of acts described herein. PINK only received answers from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Justice, but none from any of the MPs it addressed.

³ United Nations Human Rights Council resolution 22/6 of 21 March 2013, paragraph 5 (UN Document A/HRC/22/6), available at http://humanrightshouse.org/HRHN/Why_Human_Rights_Defenders/index.html.

⁴ Human Rights House Network of 13 September 2013 to the President, the Prosecutor General, the Minister of Justice, and the Chief of the Police of the Republic of Armenia, available at <http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/19558.html>.

The Republic of Armenia has committed itself internationally to protect, empower and support human rights defenders by co-sponsoring the resolutions on the protection of human rights defenders at the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council.

We therefore urge the Armenian authorities to:

- **Immediately investigate all cases of threats and attacks against human rights defenders, in particular the most recent ones against participants of the “Rainbow” forum, and bring the perpetrators to justice;**
- **Take appropriate steps to guarantee a safe and enabling environment in which human rights defenders can operate free from hindrance and insecurity, in the whole country and in all sectors of society, especially by providing concrete support to threatened human rights defenders to ensure their security;**
- **Ensure that various political leaders publicly express support to threatened human rights defenders and denounce such threats and attacks, including in support of the participants of the “Rainbow” forum, and thereby affirm the legitimacy of their work.**

Yours sincerely,

Human Rights House Yerevan (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Helsinki Association for Human Rights
- Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly – Vanadzor
- Public Information and Need of Knowledge (PINK Armenia)
- Women’s Resource Centre

Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House in exile, Vilnius (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Belarus Watch
- Belarusian PEN Centre
- Human Rights Centre “Viasna”

Human Rights House Belgrade (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Belgrade Centre for Human Rights
- Lawyers Committee for Human Rights – YUCOM
- Civic Initiatives
- Helsinki Committee for Human Rights
- Policy Centre

Human Rights House Bergen (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Rafto Foundation for Human Rights

Educational Human Rights House Chernihiv (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- AHALAR
- ALMENDA
- Chernihiv public committee of human rights protection
- Postup
- Transcarpathian Public Center
- M’ART

Human Rights House Kyiv (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Association of Ukrainian Monitors on Human Rights Conduct in Law Enforcement
- Center for Civil Liberties
- Human Rights Information Center
- Kharkiv Human Rights Protection group

Human Rights House Oslo (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Health and Human Rights Info (HHRI)
- Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF)

Human Rights House Tbilisi (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Article 42 of the Constitution
- Caucasian Centre for Human Rights and Conflict Studies (CAUCASIA)
- Georgian Centre for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (GCRT)
- Human Rights Center (HRIDC)
- Media Institute
- Union Sapari - Family without Violence

Human Rights House Zagreb (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- APEO / UPIM - Association for Promotion of Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities
- B.a.B.e.
- CMS - Center for Peace Studies
- Documenta - Centre for Dealing with the Past
- GOLJP - Civic Committee for Human Rights
- Svitanje - Association for Protection and Promotion of Mental Health

Copies to:

- Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe
- Private Office of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe
- Council of Europe Office in Armenia
- United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders
- United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly
- Cabinet of European Union Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations
- Delegation of the European Union in Armenia
- Diplomatic community in Yerevan, Brussels, Geneva, New York and Strasbourg
- Various ministries of foreign affairs and parliamentary committees on foreign affairs

About the Human Rights House Network (www.humanrightshouse.org)

*The **Human Rights House Network (HRHN)** is a community of human rights defenders working for more than 100 independent organisations operating in 16 Human Rights Houses in 13 countries. Empowering, supporting and protecting human rights defenders, the Network members unite their voices to promote the universal freedoms of assembly, organisation and expression and the right to be a human rights defender.*

***Human Rights House Yerevan** unites 11 organisations working in various fields related to human rights protection aiming to create “one access door” services for the beneficiaries and by this eliminate the difficulties that citizens may face for getting support and services for their human rights protection. HRH Yerevan was registered in Armenia in 2014 and became an HRHN associated member in 2012. It will serve also as a platform for different civil society organisations, movements and civic initiatives to join the effort and empower human rights protection in Armenia.*

*The **Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF)**, based in Oslo with an office in Geneva, is HRHN’s secretariat. HRHF is international partner of the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders. HRHF has consultative status with the United Nations and HRHN has participatory status with the Council of Europe.*