



**HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSE
FOUNDATION**

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Armenia: Human rights organisations should be protected in their work, also when they work on issues related to Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus region

Human Rights House Network and South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders members and partners write to you because we are concerned about the latest attacks against human rights organisations in Armenia. We urge the authorities of the Republic of Armenia to ensure the security of human rights defenders in their work.

On 16 April 2012 a gathering of more than 200 people outside the office of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly in Vanadzor (HCAV) turned into a public mobbing of human rights defenders and their organisation. The organisation is well known and highly respected for its work to promote and protect fundamental rights of all people in Armenia.

The gathering took place because the Caucasus Centre of Peace Making Initiatives, within the framework of the Stop Film Festival, planned to organise the screening of Azerbaijani films in HCAV's offices on 17 April 2012. A large group of young protestors entered the offices of HCAV, a private property, and insulted HCAV's employees and threatened to break the equipment and furniture if they screened the films. Protestors then tore down a banner with the text: "The problems of missing soldiers of Karabakh War Vanadzor-Ganja", claiming it was anti-Armenian. Violence escalated outside of HCAV's office with the crowd throwing stones and eggs at it, thereby breaking windows. Due to the attack, HCAV's Head gave in and announced to the aggressive crowd that the film festival would not take place in their premises as planned. Then the violence decreased.

During the attack, four police officers stood next to the crowd, and other police officers behind the crowd. None of the police officers intervened during the attack, although HCAV called the Vanadzor Police Department for assistance and protection against the violent crowd.

Since 28 March 2012, political parties, candidates to parliament and organisations close to the municipality leadership have organised pickets and demonstrations against a film festival to be held in the premises of "Asparez" Journalist Club in Gyumri, the second largest city of Armenia. On 12 April 2012, the Caucasus Centre of Peace Making Initiatives had to cancel the projection of four Azerbaijani

short films. A group of 50 protestors blocked access to the premises of “Asparez” Journalist Club and threatened the organisers and the hosts of the film screening. The leader of “Asparez” Journalist Club is a well-known and respected journalist who also covered the review of Armenia at the United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review.

Both HCAV and “Asparez” are partners NGOs of the Human Rights House Network and member of the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders, a cooperation platform in the South Caucasus region for human rights defenders to share knowledge, experiences and different views.

The incidents above illustrate the problems of freedom of association and assembly in Armenia, in particular when it comes to restrictions on indoor gatherings focusing on sensitive issues. After her visit to Armenia in June 2010, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders stated her concerned that indoor gatherings have been hindered since March 2008 and that the difficulties experienced by NGOs in renting meeting space appear to be systematic. Many NGOs attempting to organize events in venues such as hotel conference rooms have been denied.¹ The “Asparez” Journalist Club and HCAV hosted these events, as human rights organisations respecting and promoting the fundamental right to freedom of expression, although the NGOs were not organisers of the film screenings.

We regret that the police was not fulfilling their duties and did not interfere when a human rights office was attacked. We remind the Armenian authorities about the PACE Resolution 1837 (2011), which recommended the authorities to fully reform the police force and establish an independent police complaints mechanism.

The human rights organisations have the role to encourage respect and promotion of human rights. The issues and conflicts the organisations address are delicate, challenging and emotional for many people in Armenia and the region – but nevertheless, the issues are very important to address in the process of making peace and reconcile with the past. As authorities, you have positive obligations in supporting and protecting these platforms for free debates and communications – and making the people understand why these processes are so important. We therefore believe that Armenian authorities should encourage regional cooperation platforms and protect human rights defenders and other actors who are trying to contribute to increasing respect and information sharing between people in the South Caucasus region.

In this regard, we are extremely worried that Mr. Yeghishe Kirakosyan, Deputy Minister of Justice of the Republic of Armenia, has made declarations on 10 May 2012 at the 48th session of the United Nations Committee against Torture, linking human rights defenders and their NGOs working on human rights, including their reporting to the Committee, with anti-Armenian propaganda and hate-speech. State representatives should acknowledge publicly the importance of human rights defenders and their work.

We therefore urge Armenian authorities to:

- **To investigate all the cases of harassment and violence that occurred against human rights defenders and their NGOs since March 2012, in Gyumri, Vanadzor, and Yerevan, and bring those responsible to justice;**
- **As already recommended by the Special Rapporteur in her report on Armenia in 2010, to “publicly acknowledge the role and importance of human rights defenders in**

¹ Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders Margaret Sekaggya report to the United Nations Human Rights Council, addendum, 23 December 2010, paragraphs 75 and following (UN Doc.: A/HRC/16/44/Add.2).

achieving a flourishing, pluralistic and democratic society”²;

- **To take all effective measures to ensure the right to exercise freedom of expression and association for all in Armenia, and to ensure physical security of human rights defenders and their NGOs when they organise events.**

Sincerely,

- Armenian Helsinki Association
- Helsinki Citizen Assembly, Vanadzor, Armenia
- Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO
- Rule of Law
- Shakhhatun Women’s Democracy Promotion NGO
- Women's Resource Centre of Armenia

- Azerbaijan Human Rights House
 - Association for Protection of Women's Rights (APWR)
 - Azerbaijan Lawyers Association
 - Media Rights Institute
 - Legal Education Society

- Human Rights House Belarus in exile (Vilnius)

- Human Rights House Sarajevo
 - Association of Female Citizens "Renaissance"
 - Foundation CURE
 - Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina
 - Regional Co-ordinator for Youth Groups
 - Serb Civic Council
 - Woman and Society Centre

- Human Rights House Zagreb
 - APEO/UPIM Association for Promotion of Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities
 - Be Active Be Emancipated B.a.B.e.
 - CMS - Centre 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

- Human Rights House Tbilisi
 - Article 42 of the Constitution
 - The Caucasian Centre for Human Rights and Conflict Studies (CAUCASIA)
 - The Human Rights Centre Georgia (HRIDC)
 - The Georgian Center for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims – GCRT

² *Idem*, paragraph 106.

- Union Sapari - Family without Violence
- Human Rights House Oslo
 - Health and Human Rights Info
 - Human Rights House Foundation
 - Norwegian Burma Committee
 - Norwegian Helsinki Committee
 - Norwegian Tibet Committee
- Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in Poland
- Russian Research Center for Human Rights
 - Human Rights Network Group
 - Independent Psychiatric Association of Russia
 - Moscow Centre for Prison Reform
 - Moscow Helsinki Group
 - Mother's Right Foundation
 - Non-violence International
 - Right of the Child
 - Right to Live and have Civil Dignity
 - Social Partnership Foundation
 - Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia
- Belgrade Centre for Human Rights
- Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia
- Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights YUCOM Serbia
- Institute for Peace and Democracy, Azerbaijan
- Human Rights Club, Azerbaijan
- Public Association for Assistance to Free Economy, Azerbaijan
- Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union
- Article 19 UK
- Index on Censorship UK

Copies have been sent to:

- UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, Geneva
- Directorate General of Human Rights and Legal Affairs of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg
- Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg
- Council of Europe in Armenia
- OSCE office in Yerevan
- European Union delegation in Armenia
- Subcommittee on Human Rights of the European Parliament, Brussels

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

The Human Rights House Network is a forum of cooperation between established and emerging Human Rights Houses, uniting 90 NGOs in 15 countries in Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, East and Horn of Africa, and Western Europe. HRHN's aim is to protect, empower and support human rights defenders and their organizations. The Human Rights House Foundation, based in Oslo (Norway) and Geneva (Switzerland), is the secretariat of the Human Rights House Network.

About the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders (www.caucasusnetwork.org)

The South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders is a network of 30 impartial and independent non-governmental organizations from the region of South Caucasus, aiming at supporting the human rights defenders in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.