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Promoting a safer environment for human rights defenders in Armenia

Dear Mr President, Mr Prime Minister, Mr Chairman, Ms Vice-Chairman,

Throughout recent weeks, human rights defenders (HRDs) in Armenia have witnessed growing hate speech and smear campaigns against them, coming from (often fake) Facebook profiles and media outlets; the latter, with a purpose of giving access to a larger audience, are quite often publicising individual posts on social networks that contain threats of violence, death and rape threats, thus re-targeting human rights defenders¹. Among others, an MP, Gevorg Petrosyan, also spoke against “homosexuals and their supporters”, calling for their eradication from Armenia.

In particular, harassment and threats against human rights defenders working on gender equality and sexual orientation, accompanied by impunity and silence from political authorities has been a long-standing concern in Armenia. “Through [...] silence, and by lack of judicial and political action against perpetrators of such acts, the Armenian authorities create[d] an unacceptable climate of impunity for those attacking human rights defenders”.² Already back in 2013, following concrete threats of violence made against the Women’s Resource Centre of Armenia (a member NGO of Human Rights House Yerevan) and its Executive Director Lara Aharonian, we were prompted to issue a joint letter of concern with over 50 members of Human Rights House Network.³ In 2015 we have issued another letter of concern about attacks and threats against another member NGO of Human Rights House Yerevan.⁴

¹ As documented by HRH Yerevan, civil society members are being called “Sorosakans”, “agents of West” and “grant eaters”

² Human Rights House Network Letter of Concern, “Armenia Must Support and Protect Human Rights Defenders”, 19 November 2015, available at: <https://humanrightshouse.org/letters-of-concern/armenia-must-support-and-protect-human-rights-defenders/>

³ Human Rights House Network Letter of Concern, “Threats and attacks against organisations working on gender issues in Armenia”, 10 September 2013, available at: <https://humanrightshouse.org/letters-of-concern/concern-letter-threats-and-attacks-against-organisations-working-on-gender-issues-in-armenia/>

⁴ See footnote 2

More recently, a new case of threats of violence and death against Lara Aharonian and her family has raised concern among civil society organisations in Armenia and abroad. On 8 March 2019, Lara Aharonian, one of the most outspoken women human rights defenders in the South Caucasus, working on the advancement of women's rights, started receiving threats of violence, death, rape and hate speech through television and mostly social media. Among others, a TV station, a private company, ordinary social media users and a law professor have participated in these threats that have also targeted Lara Aharonian's husband and children.

Such threats emerged after an event on International Women's Day, at an event with the title "Civil society and National Assembly cooperation platform for equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men" organised at the National Assembly of Armenia. Lara Aharonian spoke about the need to treat all women equally, no matter whether they are mothers, sisters, trans, bisexual women, part of national minorities, poor women, etc. On 11 March 2019 Lara Aharonian applied to the police and has been vocal since then on social media about threats against her. Several national NGOs issued a public statement.⁵ Unfortunately, there was no reaction from any public official which our partners believe enabled to a certain extent the escalation of hate speech against HRDs and Lara Aharonian in particular. A new wave of hate speech started following one of her Facebook posts on 2 April, where she was arguing about moral grounds of wars. The situation worsened when media outlets publicised a Facebook post in which a user was offering 15 million AMD to those, who would commit violence against Lara, humiliate her and share the video on Facebook.

Under the UN Resolution on human rights defenders that Armenia co-sponsored, as well as the instruments of the Council of Europe, States are encouraged to create "safe and enabling environment" for the work of human rights defenders; to recognise "essential" and "legitimate role" that they have to play in the society and to "firmly" and "publicly" "condemn" smear campaigns and "discrimination" against HRDs even when orchestrated by "non-state actors".⁶ Following his visit to Armenia in November 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of peaceful assembly and association stated that "it is fundamental that as part of the effective measures that need to be put in place, the Government effectively combats hate speech and incitement to hatred towards minority groups, condemns the use of discriminatory statements in public discourse, including by public figures and ensures security and safety of participants when reasonably required".⁷

The UN Resolution on Women HRDs encourages states "to combat[...] impunity by ensuring that those [including "non-state actors"] responsible for [...] gender-based [...] threats", also expressed "online", are "promptly brought to justice".⁸ Only recently, the UN Special Rapporteur on HRDs called upon states to "prioritise the protection of women defenders in online spaces and adopt laws, policies and practices that [...] protect them from libel and hate speech."⁹ HRHF also encourages Armenia to consider developing a mechanism for addressing smear campaigns, threats and hate speech to protect all and in particular women HRDs.

In order to fulfil their international commitments and obligations, it is fundamental that the Armenian authorities take a strong public stance on such cases of threats and harassment against human rights defenders. Voicing support for the activities of human rights defenders and civil society organisations is a key component in the creation of an environment where these can freely operate. Once human rights defenders are under threat it is all the more important that the authorities publicly express their unwavering support and do their utmost to promote a better political environment. Public support by State officials sends a message of accountability that is essential to prevent further escalation and to encourage human rights defenders to pursue their work.

⁵ Human Rights House Yerevan and Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women, "New Wave of Hate Against Lara Aharonian", 15 March 2019. Available at: <http://coalitionagainstviolence.org/en/6850/>

⁶ UN General Assembly Resolution, *Twentieth anniversary and promotion of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, A/RES/72/247, adopted on 24/12/2017; PACE resolution 2225 (2018) on *Protecting human rights defenders in Council of Europe member states*, article 5.6; Declaration of the Committee of Ministers on *Council of Europe action to improve the protection of human rights defenders and promote their activities*, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 6 February 2008 at the 1017th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies

⁷ Statement by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Clément Nyaletsossi VOULE, at the conclusion of his visit to the Republic of Armenia, 16 November 2018. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23882&LangID=E>

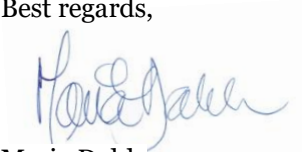
⁸ UN General Assembly Resolution, *Promotion of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms: protecting women human rights defenders*, A/RES/68/181, adopted on 18/12/2013, article 9

⁹ UN General Assembly Resolution, *Situation of women human rights defenders, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders*, A/HRC/40/60, adopted on 10/01/2019, para. 108(d)

We therefore recommend to the Armenian authorities, and in particular to the Government and Parliament of Armenia, in line with their commitments as UN and Council of Europe members:

- **To ensure that political leaders publicly express support to human rights defenders and their work; and publicly and firmly condemn threats against them;**
- **To guarantee safe and enabling environment in which all human rights defenders, including women HRDs can operate without hindrance and insecurity;**
- **To develop a mechanism for countering hate speech, harassment and smear campaign against human rights defenders, in particular, women HRDs.**

Best regards,



Maria Dahle
Director, Human Rights House Foundation