

# **Organization for Defending Victims of Violence (ODVV)**

## **Armenia**

### **Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review**

#### **Eighth Session of the UPR Working Group of the UN Human Rights**

#### **Council**

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#### **About ODVV**

1. The Organization for Defending Victims of Violence (ODVV) is a non-governmental, non-profit, non-partisan organization in Special Consultative Status to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). The ODVV was established in 1988 in Tehran and has been active in the field of human rights and humanitarian activities.

2. The ODVV is also associated to the United Nations Department of Public Information (UNDPI), a participatory of the NGOs Coalition for an International Court (based in New York), and national coordinator of the Global March Against Child Labour (based in New Delhi) which cooperated in a variety of issues with international organizations and has working relations with many NGOs in Iran and around the globe.

3. The ODVV is also a member of the International Organization against Small and Light Weapons, and the UN Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations (CONGO), and the International Movement for a Just World (JUST), AMAN Network of Rehabilitation Centres in the Middle East and North Africa, International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT).

4. During the last 2 decades, we have done so many activities, mainly informative in regards with human rights and supportive in regards with the victims of violence. Various human rights education courses, workshops, seminars, conferences have been held or co-held by the ODVV for various sectors of society: civil society institutions and governmental organizations.

#### **5. Other Activities:**

- Participation in UN Commission on Human Rights annual sessions, and the new Human Rights Council sessions in Geneva. Written and oral statements on various items of the agenda are issued by the ODVV.
- Internship for foreign students
- Publication of different books and booklets on human rights such as Rights of the Child, Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia. Publication of Defenders Newsletter

(English), human rights news and developments bulletin (Farsi), Rights of the Child bulletin (Farsi  
- Daily electronic human rights newsletter in English and Farsi

## **Background**

6. Armenia is a party to several international human rights treaties, including:

- a) Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.
- b) Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.
- c) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- d) Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- e) Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (signature only).
- f) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.
- g) Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.
- h) International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.
- i) International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.
- j) Optional Protocol to the Covenant on Economic; Social and Cultural Rights (signature only).
- k) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (signature only).
- l) Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (signature only).
- m) Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- n) Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.
- o) Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children child prostitution and child pornography.

7. Armenia is a former Soviet Socialist Republic that gained its independence on 21 September 1991. Armenia a constitutional, republic with a population of 2.96 million, of which 97.9% are ethnic Armenians, and Yezidi (Kurd) 1.3%, Russian 0.5%, other 0.3% making up the rest.

8. Armenia has a very high level of adult literacy (99.7%) and Since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia has made progress in implementing many economic reforms including privatization, price reforms, and prudent fiscal policies. The conflict with Azerbaijan over the ethnic Armenian-dominated region of Nagorno-Karabakh contributed to a severe economic decline in the early 1990s. By 1994, however, the Armenian Government launched an ambitious IMF-sponsored economic liberalization program that resulted in positive growth rates. Economic growth has averaged over 10% in recent years. Armenia's GDP stands at \$18.77.

9. Despite the vast improvements made over the last 18 years, Armenia still has a number of human rights issues which must be considered. In its 2009 annual report Amnesty International had the following to say about Armenia's human rights conditions:

### **Journalists and the mass media**

10. Journalists and media outlets that covered opposition activities were harassed. The vague wording of restrictions on freedom of expression gave the authorities broad powers to restrict opposition or independent media. Several opposition media outlets reported having websites closed, and newspaper editions were refused permission for publication. The Yerevan Press Club, the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, Internews, the Asparez Press Club of Giumri and the Femida public organization expressed concern that further delays to the government issuing broadcast licences would result in reduced media diversity. In August *Haykakan Zhamanak* (Armenian Times) journalist Lusineh Barseghian was beaten by unknown men. Later that month, Hratch Melkumian, acting head of the Armenian Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, was beaten in central Yerevan. There was reportedly no progress in the investigations into these assaults by the end of the year.

11. A number of assaults on opposition and human rights activists were not investigated promptly or thoroughly. On 21 May, Mikael Danielian, a prominent human rights activist and director of the Armenian Helsinki Association, a human rights NGO, was shot at pointblank range with a pneumatic gun (a gun firing compressed air), reportedly by a former leader of a political party. Mikael Danielian was not seriously wounded. On 28 May Arsen Kharatian, a leader of the Armenian Democratic Youth Movement, was assaulted in Yerevan by unknown men. He was hospitalized with severe head injuries. On 25 June Narek Hovakimian, a member of the Hima youth movement and the opposition Alternative coalition, was assaulted in Yerevan by two unknown men. No one had been charged for these assaults by the end of the year

12. Jehovah's Witnesses continued to face imprisonment because of their beliefs. As of 1 September, 77 young men were in prison for refusing on grounds of conscience to perform military service. The authorities still failed to introduce a genuinely civilian alternative service, in spite of previous commitments, with military supervision continuing over the alternative civilian service. Jehovah's Witnesses reported further problems on release. The authorities refused to grant them certification of full service, without which important documents such as passports and internal residence permits were harder to obtain. There were also reports of physical attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses, including allegedly by supporters of the country's dominant religious group. Investigation of these assaults was said to be slow or non-existent.

13. Over a quarter of women in Armenia were said to have been hit by a family member and about two-thirds were said to have experienced psychological abuse, yet the authorities failed to prevent, investigate and punish violence against women. Adequate structures and resources to combat violence against women were lacking. Shelters previously operated by NGOs had closed due to lack of funding early in the year; one

was able to reopen in September. A draft law on domestic violence, promoted by the Women's Rights Centre NGO, was made available for public discussion.

### **Recommendations**

11. The Organization for Defending Victims of Violence urges the government of Armenia to:

- a) Fully recognize and observe the right to freedom of religion and belief and to legislate laws that will allow Jehovah's Witnesses to do alternative community service instead of military national service.
- b) To promote women's rights and a culture of nondiscrimination against women by publicity campaigns and also in schoolbook texts in primary and secondary schools and universities.
- c) To remove restrictions on press and media that criticize the government, and to permit them to express different views freely.
- d) To respect and provide assistance and protection to human rights organizations and activists.

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