

“The Status of Human Rights Defenders in Armenia”

Distinguished delegates,
Dear colleagues.

I am going to present today the joint submission by Human Rights House Yerevan regarding the status of human rights defenders in Armenia.

In its last Universal Periodic Review in January 2015, Armenia accepted all recommendations specific to human rights defenders (HRDs), mainly calling for better protection against harassment and intimidation, respect and guarantee the right to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, as well as speedily and effectively investigating threats against human rights defenders.

Defamation campaigns carried out by the state media and public officials were often used to stigmatize HRDs and discredit their work in Armenia from 2015 to 2018. These campaigns were portraying HRDs as foreign agents and spies who could result in increased threats. Even though freedom of expression was relatively respected and a free media existed in Armenia in that period of time, journalists who were critical of the authorities and those who exposed human rights violations and corruption were subject to harassment, restrictions on their work, threats and attacks. Human Rights Defenders consider the “Velvet Revolution” in May 2018 as an opportunity to advance policies which prioritize social justice, ensuring space for civil society action in Armenia and protect the human rights of human rights defenders as well.

Nevertheless, challenges remain in many areas with respect to guaranteeing the freedom and security of HRDs. Cases of human rights violations at times of public demonstrations have been reported, including excessive use of force by the police – such as the use of water cannon, sound grenades during several protests in Armenia. The State has prosecuted and detained human rights defenders during different peaceful protests who are critical of its policies. There is an absence of full and impartial investigations into acts of violence against defenders and there has been a downward trend in respect of freedom of the press. The criminal cases instituted in connection with those incidents were subsequently terminated, while the police officers, who had committed violence against the participants of peaceful assembly, were subject to disciplinary measures and fines only. This sort of trends could be observed at the peaceful protests during 2015 Electric Yerevan, 2016’s mass protests (largely peaceful) in Yerevan, sparked by the armed occupation of a police station, in the framework of the Armenia’s Velvet Revolution in 2018, etc.

The authorities have failed to meet their obligation to facilitate and support peaceful protests, and in many cases, they have undermined efforts to ensure events remained peaceful. The freedom of expression is manipulated in the media and civil society domains by means of inciting mistrust and hatred towards human rights defenders, especially, persons and individuals engaged in the protection of vulnerable groups, as well as by calls to hinder their activities and through physical vendetta. This style of

conduct is particularly encouraged and sponsored by groups representing the former political elite and media sources affiliated with them.

The patterns of harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders, as well as cases of continued denial of the right to an effective remedy are the problems that human rights defenders in particular risks face.

Human Rights defenders working in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights are extremely vulnerable in the public sector as well, as they are harassed both by state institutions and by reactionary groups promoting discriminatory culture. 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 on March 8, 2019, after her speech at the NA of Armenia. 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. However, the Police of Armenia do not take practical steps on this situation, the cases are not launched and proper investigation is missing.

The institutional impediments to protecting the rights of LGBT persons negatively affect the human rights defenders working in this field, as the impediments contribute to the reinforcement of social stereotypes and spread of hate speech against LGBT human rights defenders.

For example, on August 2018, while an LGBTI activist was hosting eight friends, some of them were LGBTI activists, in his parents' house in one of the villages in Armenia, a mob of approximately 30 persons attacked them and chased them out of the village, hitting, kicking, and throwing stones at them while yelling insults. Six of the activists were taken to the hospital. The victims reported the attack to police, who opened a criminal case on charges of beating. In December 2018, the police dropped the case based on the November Amnesty, although nobody had been charged within the case. LGBT rights defender Lilit Martirosyan, who gave a speech at the National Assembly of Armenia in which she discussed the issues faced by the LGBT community in the country was severely criticized by the chair of the Standing Committee on Human Rights and Public Affairs, which forced her to leave the room. Since the day of the speech, the human rights defender, her colleagues and family have faced intimidation and death threats.

The pressures against environmental activists that had begun yet in 2016 persisted through 2019. The purpose of such repressions was to create impediments to their activities at policy and decision-making levels. The environmental activists are being frequently targeted by the mining companies and other businesses.

Pressures against attorneys and political and civil rights defenders were observed in the Armenian courts, specifically in relation to the high profile trials.

The government and state institutions of Armenia, in violation of their obligations towards Armenia's citizens and international partners, not only do not promote the protection of human rights in Armenia but on the contrary, they systematically impede human rights

protection through the judicial, local and central governance and non-governmental institutions. Moreover, Armenia does not have a law or policy implementing the Declaration or a national protective mechanism for human rights defenders at risk.

VI. Recommendations to the Government of Armenia

We urge the Government of the Republic of Armenia

- 1) to conduct a high-level public campaign in support of human rights defenders with the official and public condemnation of attacks on human rights defenders and their families when they occur;
- 2) to carry out an independent prompt, effective and impartial investigation into attacks on human rights defenders and end the atmosphere of impunity against human rights defenders;
- 3) to register and compile statistics of threats and attacks against human rights defenders, along with information relating to their investigation and rates of prosecution.