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Republic of Armenia

Head of state: **Serzh Sargsyan**

Head of government: **Karen Karapetyan (replaced Hovik Abrahamyan in September)**

Police used excessive force to suppress largely peaceful demonstrations in the capital, Yerevan, in July. Hundreds of individuals were arbitrarily arrested. Many reported being injured, beaten or otherwise ill-treated during the arrest and while in detention.

BACKGROUND

The year was marked by economic and political volatility, and growing security concerns linked to the outbreak of large-scale military confrontation in April in Nagorno-Karabakh, the breakaway region of Azerbaijan supported by Armenia. On 8 September, Prime Minister Abrahamyan resigned, citing his government's failure to address economic and political challenges. On 13 September, President Sargsyan appointed former Yerevan Mayor Karen Karapetyan as the new Prime Minister.

EXCESSIVE USE OF FORCE

On 17 July a group of armed men stormed a police compound in the Erebuni district of Yerevan, killing one police officer, injuring two and taking several as hostages.

Following the seizure of the compound, hundreds gathered at the Liberty Square to show solidarity with the gunmen and join their calls for the release of the imprisoned opposition activist Jirair Seifilian – who had been charged with illegal arms possession – and to call for the resignation of the President. A two-week-long standoff with police sparked widespread anti-government protests in Yerevan, resulting in several clashes with the police. The protests took place daily and dwindled after the hostage-takers surrendered on 30 July. While police allowed peaceful gatherings in most instances, they regularly detained protesters and others. On several occasions, protests in Yerevan were dispersed with excessive force.

On 20 July, clashes ensued after police refused to allow protesters to pass food to the armed group inside the compound. Some protesters started pushing police officers and throwing stones and water bottles. Police responded by using stun grenades and tear gas indiscriminately and injured many peaceful protesters and bystanders. Police then started dispersing the rally and arresting participants. Several eyewitnesses said that police officers chased and beat fleeing demonstrators before arresting them; 136 people were reported detained, dozens injured.

On 29 July police used excessive force against peaceful demonstrators in Sari-Tagh, near the seized compound. The police warned the crowd to disperse; shortly afterwards they fired tear gas and threw stun grenades indiscriminately, wounding dozens of demonstrators and some journalists. A group of men armed with wooden batons then moved into the crowd from behind the police line and ambushed and beat demonstrators and journalists. Meanwhile, the police blocked the street to prevent the crowd from fleeing and proceeded to arrest all demonstrators. At least 14 journalists reported being deliberately targeted by stun grenades and beaten to prevent them from live reporting. At least 60 people were reported injured and hospitalized, including with severe burns from exploding grenades. During the following weeks, five police officers were suspended for using excessive force; the head of Yerevan police was dismissed and 13 police officers, including some of high rank, were formally reprimanded for "failing to prevent violent attacks on protesters and journalists". Investigations into both incidents were ongoing at the end of the year.

ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND DETENTIONS

Following the events of 17 July, police summoned political activists for questioning. According to media reports, around 200 individuals, mostly opposition supporters and activists, were brought to police stations, without being formally arrested. Activists reported that police visited their family homes, threatened their family members with arrests and conducted illegal searches. Activists were questioned and held in police stations, some for more than 12 hours, and released without charge. They were not allowed to notify their families or relatives of their whereabouts and were denied access to their lawyers.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Torture and other ill-treatment by police and in detention facilities continued to be widely reported.

In February, the Nubarashen prison administration forced imprisoned activist Vardges Gaspari to undergo a psychiatric examination after he alleged that the administration had ordered his cellmates to beat, threaten and pour cold water on him.

During the July events, a number of activists reported being denied access to water, medicine and necessary medical aid after being detained by the police for participating in protests; in some cases they were held for more than 12 hours without charge. Several individuals reported being severely beaten or otherwise ill-treated at the time of arrest and in detention, and prevented from notifying their relatives and lawyers of their whereabouts.

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

In July, the government changed the law on abortion to ban sex-selective abortion between the 12th and 22nd weeks of pregnancy. The new law introduced a mandatory three-day waiting period and counselling for women after they had made the initial appointment for an abortion. Some women's groups raised concerns that the waiting period might be used to discourage women from having abortions and result in increased corruption, unsafe abortions and, consequently, an

increase in maternal mortality. According to reports by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) sex-selective abortions were "prevalent" in Armenia.

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