

GUIDELINES RELATING TO THE ELIGIBILITY OF ASYLUM-SEEKERS FROM ARMENIA

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Guidelines relating to the eligibility of asylum-seekers from Armenia

1. Introduction

1.1. Currently Armenia is facing an extremely harsh social and economic situation, which is the result of a combination of factors, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, the earthquake in 1988, several past years of armed conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, and the present deadlock in the conflict. The main problems faced by this society in transition include widespread poverty, lack of prospect for economic development, widespread corruption, and to a large extent weak structures to support rights of the individuals.

1.2. This paper aims to provide some general guidelines to facilitate the determination of the possible need for international protection of asylum-seekers from Armenia. It is not exhaustive in covering all situations which may come up in practice, and is not meant to be used as a recipe for determining each and every individual case; which should be considered on its own merits by applying the appropriate criteria.

2. General Situation in Armenia

2.1. For the last ten years, Armenians have been living under difficult economic conditions, mainly caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, and reinforced by the severe earthquake in 1988, and by the economic blockade imposed on Armenia by Turkey and Azerbaijan as a retaliatory measure for the military confrontation in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. On the macro-economic level the Armenian economy has improved somewhat in the last few years with a low rate of inflation, relatively stable currency and growth in gross national product. However, this has not yet resulted in any improvement of the living conditions of the majority of the people. This situation has triggered a mass migration from Armenia, and it is estimated that over the last decade some 20-25 per cent if not more of a population of 3-3.5 million has left the country permanently or temporarily. Many have left for Moscow and other parts of the Russian Federation, but a substantial number has also found its way to the Central and Western Europe or overseas. It is obvious that this movement includes a number of strategies to establish oneself in a new country also including requests for asylum.

2.2. It should be noted that Armenians have historically a strong tradition of migration, and there are substantial old Armenian communities in the Russian Federation, the US, Europe and the Middle East. This fact is likely a contributing factor to the continuing outflow of Armenian nationals over the last decade, in higher numbers than from neighbouring countries. Although many Armenians are currently depending on remittances from relatives abroad, this development has a strong negative effect in relation to the development of the Armenian society, in particular as there is a large number of educated and relatively resourceful individuals among the migrants. The trend of migration from Armenia is expected to continue, as there are weak prospects for substantial improvements in the economic situation in the near future.

3. Political Developments - Human Rights

3.1. Armenia declared independence on 21 September 1991, and as such is located in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). After independence Armenia established a parliamentary democracy. The country has witnessed political instability, together with restrictions imposed on freedom of expression and association, although a gradual improvement has been noted. The parliamentary elections and the adoption of the new Constitution in 1995 were criticised by the political opposition and defined "free, but not fair" by observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

3.2. On 22 September 1996, the presidential elections took place. According to the official results, President Levon Ter-Petrossian was re-elected with about 51 per cent of the votes. OSCE observers stated that violations of law were recorded during the elections and the final mission report stated "concern for the overall integrity of the election process". Therefore, on 25 September 1996, thousands of people demonstrated outside the Armenian Parliament, and armed security forces became involved in protecting the building. 70 persons were wounded and two individuals were officially reported to have died. Unofficial reports indicate that the number of casualties could be higher. Members of the opposition were detained, and the Government for two weeks provisionally banned public demonstrations after the events.

3.3. In March 1998, extraordinary presidential elections were organised, after the resignation of President Ter-Petrossian who was "ousted" from power by the ministers in control of military and interior forces. Robert Kocharian, Prime Minister of Armenia and former "president" of Nagorno-Karabakh was elected President, defeating his strongest opponent ex-communist leader Karen Demirchian. Referring to numerous violations, the OSCE concluded that the election did not meet OSCE standards. However, some improvements from the 1996 election process were noted.

3.4. On 30 May 1999, elections for the National Assembly were held in Armenia with some 55 per cent voter participation. The Unity bloc (coalition of the Yerkrpah Party and the Peoples Party) gained the largest number of votes, followed by the Communist Party of Armenia and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF, i.e. Dashnaks). More than 200 foreign observers and several thousand local election monitors reported that voting was generally free and fair, despite instances of irregularities. The observers from the Council of Europe and the OSCE voiced particular concerns over the accuracy of voter lists, the formation of election commissions, and other organizational shortcomings. Free and fair election has been put forward as one of the main prerequisites for Armenia's accession to the Council of Europe.

3.5. On 27 October 1999, eight prominent Armenian politicians, including the prime minister and Speaker of Parliament, were shot and killed in an attack during a session in the National Assembly. The perpetrators have been apprehended, but investigation has not yet revealed any clear link with any political grouping in or outside Armenia. The political situation in Armenia remained tense in the weeks after, as the assassinations left a substantial "power gap" in the country. Currently the situation is relatively stable, with the brother of the deceased prime minister appointed as new prime minister. However, there is no doubt that the October events have had and will continue to have an impact on the division of political power in Armenia.

Also, it seems clear that the peace process in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been at least temporarily derailed as a result of this development.

3.6. The human rights situation in Armenia continues to improve. With the previously banned Dashnak party reinstated in 1998, there are currently no direct restrictions on political activities in Armenia. However, concern has been expressed regarding¹:

- * the Government's manipulation and violent crackdown in connection with the September 1996 presidential election, as well as flaws in the 1998 extraordinary presidential election;
- * the judiciary's subjection to political pressure, and in general the President's extensive control functions on the executive, the legislature and the judiciary;
- * possible self-censorship in the media, as well as instances of intimidation of journalists and editors;
- * limitations on freedom of religion; and
- * the situation of conscripts and prisoners/detainees.

3.7. In 1998, a Commission on Human Rights was established under the new President. This Commission is headed by a former dissident/opposition leader and is composed of members from a variety of local NGOs and governmental agencies in Armenia. Although some concern over its independence and efficiency has been raised, the Commission has been putting several issues of concern higher on the political agenda of Armenia, such as the situation in prisons and in the army, as well as the development of an ombudsman institution in the country (a law on the institution of ombudsman is at the drafting stage).

3.8. The criminal code of Armenia is being revised and positive amendments, such as the abolition of capital punishment, the decriminalization of homosexuality and limitation of the duration of pre-trial detention have been introduced. This draft law was adopted by the Parliament in its second reading and is expected to be adopted during the first quarter of the year 2000. A new Criminal Procedure Code was adopted in January 1999.

3.9. There are no legal restrictions on the right to freedom of expression. Access to information, in particular through not-state-owned or controlled TV channels, is generally improving. A number of human rights NGOs monitor, report, and provide information on the human rights situation in Armenia. Several of these organisations express open and daily criticism over the Government policy, through mass media and publications.

3.10. A thorough judicial reform is currently ongoing in Armenia. Several UN agencies, the Council of Europe, OSCE/ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights), IOM, as well as NGOs, are providing assistance to ensure that the new legislative framework will incorporate human right standards. Armenia enjoys special guest status with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

¹ See also: US Department of State: Armenia Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998, Human Rights Watch Annual Report 1999, Amnesty International Report 1998.

and is aspiring to full membership of the organisation in the year 2000.

3.11. Armenia is a State Party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, and already a decade ago granted refugee status on a *prima facie* basis to more than 300,000 ethnic Armenians arriving from Azerbaijan. These refugees are relatively well integrated in the country, although many remain very vulnerable in view of the current difficult social and economic situation in Armenia. The refugees have acquired the same rights as Armenian citizens, except the right to vote and to be elected. In addition, ethnic Armenian refugees can obtain citizenship in a simplified order. However, some problems remain, and intervention has been required in cases where there have been threats of forced and illegal eviction of refugees from their place of accommodation. The issue of conscription of refugees remains controversial.

3.12. A national law on refugees was adopted in March 1999. Asylum-seekers originating from outside the CIS used to be left without their legal status being determined, although no cases of *refoulement* have been reported. Currently, UNHCR is working closely with the Government in assisting with the setting up of adequate structures to enable the implementation of the law on refugees and with the establishment of a fair and efficient refugee status determination procedure. Though still in an early stage, the refugee status determination procedure started recently also for non-ethnic Armenian asylum-seekers.

4. Categories of Asylum-Seekers from Armenia

4.1. When determining the refugee status of Armenian asylum-seekers, the general and human rights situation described above must be taken into consideration. Armenian asylum-seekers whose claims warrant a particular attention belong to the groups of religious minorities, homosexuals and draft evaders/deserters. However, in order to clarify the situation with the widest spectrum of possible applications by Armenian asylum-seekers, in addition to the above-mentioned groups, the situation of ethnic minorities and members of political parties is also described in the following.

Ethnic minorities

4.2. Before 1988, Azeris were the largest ethnic minority in Armenia. As the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh intensified, ethnic tensions erupted leading to mistreatment against the Azeri minority. The Armenian authorities discriminated against ethnic Azeris and were unwilling to protect them against acts of violence perpetrated by the Armenian population. Following the anti-Armenian pogroms in Baku and Sumgait (Azerbaijan) in 1988-89, the entire Azeri population was either expelled by the local authorities or fled, fearing for their lives and security.

4.3. During 1988-92, ethnic Azeris, persons of mixed Armenian/Azeri origin and couples of mixed Armenian/Azeri ethnic origin were, when not expelled, systematically victims of harassment and acts of violence, such as physical and psychological violence, threats to life, abductions, deprivation of property and social benefits, marginalization, etc. These acts were either perpetrated by the local authorities themselves or by certain circles of the society, encouraged and tolerated by the local authorities.

4.4. Only a few hundred of nearly 200,000 ethnic Azeris (mixed couples, elderly and sick) have remained and continue to live in Armenia. For the elderly and sick, departure was never an option. Some ethnic Azeris have changed their names to conceal their ethnic origin and/or to keep a low profile in the society. Currently, the Armenian Government does not seem to discriminate against the few remaining ethnic Azeris, persons of mixed Armenian/Azeri origin or mixed couples. It is likely that they have remained because they do not experience much difficulty due to their low profile and/or concealed ethnicity.

4.5. With the exception of ethnic Azeris (cf. paragraph 4.3. above), no persecution on ethnic grounds has been reported for other minorities living in Armenia. There have been allegations of instances of harassment and discrimination of Yezidis by local authorities, but UNHCR does not have information to confirm this. Some other ethnic groups, such as, Jews, Greeks, Russians and Russian Molokani and Ukrainians have to a large extent emigrated for economic or other non-persecution related reasons.

Religious minorities

4.6. The Law of the Republic of Armenia on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organisations was adopted on 7 June 1991. It provides for the freedom of conscience and the right to profess one's faith. Furthermore, it establishes the separation between the church and the state. The law recognizes, however, the Armenian Apostolic Church as the dominant religious denomination. Over 90 per cent of the Armenian population belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church. Armenia officially adopted Christianity as a state religion in 301 A.D., and the Armenian Apostolic Church is one of the oldest Christian churches. It is perceived by the authorities and the society at large as one of the pillars of the Armenian culture and nationhood.

4.7. According to information available to UNHCR, no violent acts towards religious minorities have been reported the last few years, and no religious literature was confiscated during 1998-99. However, it should be noted that this development could be due to the emigration of members of the most visible sects, rather than to more religious tolerance in Armenia towards non-traditional denominations.

4.8. Religious freedom was restricted by a Presidential Decree in 1993, which entitled the State Council on Religious Affairs to evaluate the religious nature of activities carried out by religious groups and to ban missionaries who were engaged in activities contrary to their religious mandate. Amendments to the law were adopted by the Parliament in 1997, further restricting the activities of smaller religious sects. Thus, currently, religious groups will have a right to register with the State Council on Religious Affairs only if there are at least 200 adult members (under the previous law on freedom of religion, the requirement was of 50 members). Other criteria have also to be filled, which, in practice, hamper the registration of non-traditional denominations.

4.9. About 40 religious groups are at present registered in Armenia. Registered denominations are recognised by the Armenian authorities as legal entities with, *inter alia*, the right to own property, publish newspapers, sponsor TV or radio broadcasts

and to officially invite visitors to Armenia. Furthermore, registered religious groups may perform religious functions in public and address their activities to non-members. However, to carry out such activities, they need the permission of the State Council on Religious Affairs, which is normally granted. Jehovah's Witnesses continue to be refused registration allegedly on the grounds of illegal proselytism. This group is also experiencing problems based on the fact that they do not permit military service (cf. paragraph 4.13. below).

4.10. In practice, freedom to perform religious rites and profession of faith only applies fully to traditional denominations. Religious freedom has proved to be limited when it comes to new non-traditional religious groups in the religious and cultural homogeneity of the Armenian society.²

4.11. In view of this fact, there have been suspicion, mistrust and prejudice against members of the non-traditional denomination from the part of the authorities and the local population. This trend was illustrated in 1993, for instance, when several members of the Hare Krishna community became victims of physical violence and did not receive effective protection from the authorities. In April 1995 members belonging to seven sects (Hare Krishna, the Seventh-Day Adventists, the Bahai, the Pentecostal Church, the Charismatic Church, the Evangelical Baptist Church and Jehovah's Witnesses) were attacked by the local population and members of a paramilitary militia. The acts included physical violence, destruction of objects of worship, robbing of personal belongings, and looting of temples, churches and private homes. Members of these sects have also reported that on several occasions the authorities have confiscated and destroyed their printed materials.

4.12. The members of the sects did not receive any protection from the authorities in connection with these events. During interviews, several government officials made statements directed against these religious sects. The above actions conducted against the sects were reportedly tolerated by the authorities. Subsequent statements by the government asserted, however, that these actions were not in line with government policy.

4.13. According to the Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organisations, registered religious denominations have the possibility to perform military service in unarmed units, upon the request of the State Council on Religious Affairs to the Ministry of Defence.³ However, Armenian law does not allow for conscientious objection to military service and does not provide for an alternative service. It appears that, in practice, the possibility offered by the Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organisations is rarely granted to conscientious objectors. Some denominations, in particular Jehovah's Witnesses, not being a registered religious denomination, may fear disproportionate punishment and harassment for draft evasion

² Non-traditional denominations in Armenia are: Hare Krishna, the Seventh-Day Adventists, the Bahai, the Pentecostal Church, the Charismatic Church, the Evangelical Baptist Church, the Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses. With the exception of the Jehovah's Witnesses, all the listed denominations are registered.

³ Article 19 of the law states that "All civil duties provided by the acting legislation apply also on the members of the religious organisations in the same manner as to other citizens. In certain cases of contradiction between civil duties and religious convictions, civil duties can be performed on the basis of the alternative principle and its procedure stipulated by law...".

and desertion and discriminatory treatment in the army for being a member of a non-traditional religious group. Mistreatment of members of religious minorities within the army and penal institutions has been reported.

4.14. Although mere membership of one of these religious groups would in itself not suffice to substantiate a claim to refugee status, the events described above may nevertheless in certain cases give rise to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of religion for individual members.

Homosexuals

4.15. Under Article 116 of the Armenian Criminal Code, adopted during Soviet time, sexual intercourse between consenting adult males is considered a crime and is sanctioned with up to five years of imprisonment. In the last three years, at least ten persons were condemned under this article. There is no further information or documents available indicating whether or not these cases refer to circumstances involving violence against or abuse of minors. A new Criminal Code abolishing criminal liability in cases of homosexuality is expected to be adopted in 2000.

4.16. Homosexuality is not recognised within the Armenian society, and homosexuals in the country conceal their sexual orientation. As a consequence of social pressure and traditions, and the existence of a repressive law, homosexuals are reportedly victims of discrimination and harassment, and subject to maltreatment, and do not enjoy effective protection of the authorities. Depending on the degree of severity and/or frequency of the reported acts, they may amount to persecution. In prison and in the army, homosexuals are reportedly often subject to inhuman or degrading treatment.

Draft evaders/deserters

4.17. According to Article 3 of the 1998 Law on Military Service of the Republic of Armenia, every male citizen of Armenia is obliged to perform regular military service. Young men can be recruited up to the age of 27 and shall serve for a period of two years. Those who have received a rank of officer in the course of study at the Military Chairs of the institutions of higher education may be recruited for a regular military service up to the age of 48.

4.18. In the course of 1994, the Armenian authorities resorted to irregular recruitment methods. Men of draft age were seized in public places and brought before the recruitment commissioner. Similarly, recruitment personnel visited private houses where men of draft age were reported to live and often threatened or detained the residents. Those who did not hold an exemption certificate or could not pay bribes, were transferred to military locations. Since 1995, enrolment practices have improved, although instances of harassment by military commissioners and their staff are still being reported.

4.19. Draft evasion and desertion are widespread phenomena, mostly motivated by the wretched conditions and harassment prevailing in the Armenian national army, as well as by the fear of being deployed to the front line in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In addition, Armenian legislation does not allow for conscientious objection

to military service and does not provide any alternative service (cf. *Religious minorities* above). Corruption is widespread within the Armenian army, and is allegedly pervasive also at the top level. Reportedly, young males pay bribes up to \$5,000 to avoid military service.

4.20. The authorities claim that improvements are being made, highlighting investigations and prosecutions of individuals involved in violations, facilitation of NGOs and families' visits to military units, and practical measures to improve conditions for the conscripts. Also, the Armenian Human Rights Commission has made inquiries regarding the situation in military units. It remains to be seen to what degree these alleged improvements will have an impact on the condition for recruits in Armenia.

4.21. Regarding *draft evasion*, sanctions for violation of Article 75 (on draft evasion) in the Armenian Criminal Code are imprisonment from one to three years, or up to five years if there are aggravating circumstances. In cases of draft evasion, criminal proceedings are normally initiated towards the persons who were called by the military draft bodies (*voenkomats*) for a military service but who did not present themselves at a time prescribed by that body. The annual statistics of convictions in recent years has included a considerable number of those convicted for draft evasion. In addition, according to the reports in the media, a sizeable number of young males presently outside Armenia have been charged with draft evasion and their search was announced by the law enforcement bodies.

4.22. For *deserters*, criminal proceedings are frequent. Sanctions for violation of Article 255 (on desertion) in the Armenian Criminal Code are:

- * imprisonment from three to seven years if committed by regular servicemen, five to ten years imprisonment or death penalty if there are aggravating circumstances;
- * imprisonment from five to seven years if committed by officers, seven to ten years imprisonment or death penalty if there are aggravating circumstances.

4.23. There have been reports of isolated cases of acts of harassment against families and relatives of Armenian soldiers who have evaded the draft or deserted their army units. In these cases persecution instigated by the authorities has been reported to include threats directed to relatives and detaining of family members. UNHCR has not received any recent reports on individuals being exposed to persecution on such grounds. However, such an eventuality cannot be excluded in the future, in particular in case of increased military activities in the conflict area.

4.24. According to the Armenian Military Prosecutor's Office, deserters may be sentenced to serve in special disciplinary units within the army, where conditions are reportedly even worse than in regular prisons. UNHCR does not have reliable information as to under which circumstances this sanction is applied.

4.25. There are allegations from reliable sources that Armenian conscripts have been and are deployed without consent on Azerbaijani territory in and around the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Such practices also affect ethnic Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan. With regard to recruits who have previously deserted or evaded the draft, one cannot exclude such deployment.

4.26. On several occasions, the UN Security Council has condemned the military conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and the occupation of parts of the Azerbaijani territory.⁴ Violations of international humanitarian law, such as, hostage taking and execution of prisoners of war have been reported throughout the conflict. A non-war, non-peace situation prevails since the cease-fire agreement was negotiated in 1994. Although skirmishes occur, both sides have regularly expressed their commitment to the truce. In 1999, the peace process saw some positive signs. The presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan met several times and gradually a fragile atmosphere of more trust seems to have developed. However, the killings in the Armenian Parliament in October 1999 have left a power gap, which according to the comments by local as well as foreign observers will delay the process towards a solution of the conflict.

4.27. Consequently, and in view of the above, UNHCR advises to exercise particular scrutiny of cases concerning male asylum-seekers having deserted their army units. In addition, refusal to perform military service on grounds of conscience and political conviction will be an important element in assessing claims for refugee status. Without formal guarantees from the authorities and an effective monitoring system, one cannot rule out the possibility of excessive punishment, harassment, and deployment to military operations on Azerbaijani territory.

Political party members

4.28. According to information available to UNHCR, there is currently no discrimination towards individuals based on their membership of any political organization existing in Armenia.

4.29. According to the Armenian Constitution, Armenia has a multiparty political system, and there are more than 50 registered political parties in the country. The current government was established in the context of "national unity", after the 1998 presidential elections, and consists of a coalition of representatives of several political forces in Armenia. In May 1999, parliamentary elections were held with the Miasnutyun bloc, consisting of the Yekrapah Party and the Peoples Party, garnering 42 per cent of the vote. The Communist Party and the Dashnaks followed suit with 12 per cent and eight per cent, respectively, of the votes. Subsequently, numerous changes were made in the composition of the Government, including the appointment of the new Prime Minister Vazgen Sarkisian, reflecting the strong position of the Yekrapah group.

4.30. The previous ruling party, former President Levon Ter-Petrossian's party, Armenian National Movement (ANM), did not receive enough votes to obtain representation in the National Assembly, except for the current leader, Vano Siradeghian, who was elected on majority vote. In relation to allegations of abuse of power and embezzlement there have been calls for prosecution of high-level government officials belonging to the ANM. Little action has been taken in this regard, and the current president has been subject to criticism on this account. However, the above-mentioned leader of the party, former Minister of Interior, Vano Siradeghian, is currently being charged with alleged involvement in five murder

⁴ UN Security Council resolutions 822 (1993), 30 April 1993; 853 (1993), 29 July 1993; 874 (1993), 14 October 1993; 884 (1993), 12 November 1993.

cases. Being a Member of Parliament, only the National Assembly can lift his immunity from criminal prosecution. The issue is to be presented for voting in the new parliament in the near future. The ANM continues to exist, although it is greatly reduced in size and influence since the resignation of former President Levon Ter-Petrossian.

4.31. Other opposition parties include the National Democratic Union (NDU, leader Vazgen Manukian), the Union for Self-determination (USD), the Liberal Democratic Party, and the Democratic Party of Armenia. During the post-election crackdown in 1996, offices of opposition parties were closed by the authorities, and the NDU office remained closed until after the Constitution Court ruling on the election complaints in November 1996. Currently, no member of any political party appears to face discrimination or specific problems or difficulties based on his/her membership to the said party in Armenia. This includes the political party leaders as well.

4.32. A 1994 Presidential Decree suspended the activities of the nationalist-socialist Dashnak Party on allegations that a clandestine terrorist group named *Dro* was operating inside the party and was responsible for criminal offences. Several Dashnak members were subsequently arrested, detained and placed under investigation for alleged criminal offences. Dashnak-affiliated media, including one of the country's largest newspapers, *Yerkir Daily*, were closed down without any legal basis. It should be noted that the diaspora-based Dashnak Party has a history of armed struggle against civilian targets for the "Armenian cause" during the time of Soviet Armenia. However, UNHCR has no information as to what degree the above-mentioned sanctions against the Dashnak members were based on real criminal acts.

4.33. Allegations of torture and ill-treatment of detainees were reported in connection with court proceedings against the Dashnak party in 1995; one activist died while in police custody. Judicial and procedural irregularities were reported throughout these cases. The actions of the Armenian Government against the Dashnak Party were essentially limited to high-ranking party members and/or persons suspected of being involved in the clandestine organisation *Dro*. There are no indications that other members were arrested or subjected to harassment only due to their membership of the Dashnak Party.

4.34. In 1998, President Kocharian overturned the verdicts in the Dashnak cases and all detained members were subsequently released. On 13 February 1998, the party officially stated that "the persecution and oppression of the ARF and its members... has finally ended". A previously detained Dashnak leader, Hovhannisian, was appointed special advisor to President Kocharian from 1998 to 1999, and other members have held influential positions including cabinet posts. Dashnak newspapers and publications have again become available to the public. The party is now registered and it re-established itself in Armenia as a regular and influential political force in the country.

4.35. As already mentioned in paragraph 3.5. above, eight Armenian politicians were assassinated in an attack during a session in the National Assembly in October 1999. The five perpetrators were arrested and presently a careful investigation is carried out. In addition, up to mid-January 2000, eleven persons were arrested who are claimed to have links with the assassins. In the aftermath of the October event, the

political situation remained strained for several weeks. The assassinations resulted in a "power gap" with subsequent manoeuvring of some political forces for possible gains. Currently, the situation has somewhat stabilised. Public discussion on the assassinations and on the course of investigation remains unrestricted, with a broad spectrum of views published and broadcasted by the media.

5. Summary

In general, the human rights situation in Armenia has improved in the last couple of years although the country is in a severe socio-economic situation and has seen a considerable outward migration. However, without considering the list below as exhaustive, particular attention should be paid to asylum-seekers from Armenia who base their refugee claim on the fact that they are:

- * followers and/or leaders of the non-apostolic religious groups, Hare Krishna, the Seventh-Day Adventists, the Bahai, the Pentecostal Church, the Charismatic Church, the Evangelical Baptist Church, the Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses;
- * homosexuals; and
- * draft evaders/deserters - in particular, ethnic Armenians from Azerbaijan, homosexuals and members of religious minorities - and conscientious objectors.