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Amnesty International Report 2010 - Armenia

REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA

Head of state: Serzh Sargsyan
Head of government: Tigran Sargsyan
Death penalty: abolitionist for all crimes
Population: 3.1 million
Life expectancy: 73.6 years
Under-5 mortality (m/f): 29/25 per 1,000
Adult literacy: 99.5 per cent

Impunity for perpetrators of human rights violations persisted. Freedom of expression was restricted and journalists were attacked. The ban on holding demonstrations in the centre of the capital, Yerevan, which had been introduced in March 2008 during the state of emergency, remained in place. Protection of women and girls against violence fell short of international standards. The government failed to provide a genuine alternative to military service.

Background

On 19 June, the National Assembly granted an amnesty for opposition activists imprisoned in relation to the events in Yerevan, in March 2008. The amnesty covered those who had not been charged with violent crimes and had been sentenced to prison terms of less than five years. Those who did not fall under the amnesty had their sentences halved. On 1 and 2 March 2008, violent demonstrations had taken place in Yerevan to protest against the presidential election results of 19 February, in which opposition candidate Levon Ter-Petrossian lost to incumbent President Serzh Sargsyan.

Some progress was made in Azerbaijan-Armenian talks over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, a predominantly ethnic Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan that broke away following the 1990 war. On 2 November, following talks in Moscow, Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a joint agreement aimed at resolving the dispute on the basis of international law.

Violence against women and girls

In its concluding observations published in February, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women expressed concern about the lack of legislation referring to domestic violence and the absence of a responsible state institution. The Committee called on the authorities "to enact, without delay, legislation specifically addressing domestic violence against women", and to provide sufficient shelters.

A draft law on domestic violence was under discussion by the authorities, but had not been presented to parliament by the end of the year. During 2009, only one shelter for victims of domestic violence, run by the Women's Rights Centre, was operational.

Impunity

In October, four police officers were charged with using force against members of the public during the demonstrations on 1 March 2008. By the end of the year, no independent inquiry had been conducted into allegations of use of force by police during the March 2008 events. In June 2008, an ad hoc parliamentary commission had been established to investigate the events, but did not function because the opposition refused to participate. A separate fact-finding group made up of representatives from diverse political factions and the Ombudsperson was disbanded by presidential decree in June 2009, before it became operational.

- The prosecution in the case of the shooting of Mikael Danielian, a human rights activist, was discontinued in May on the grounds that the perpetrator had allegedly acted in self-defence. In May 2008, Mikael Danielian was shot at point-blank range with a pneumatic gun by a former leader of the pro-government Armenian Progressive Party. Human rights groups voiced concern that key witness statements had not been considered by the prosecution. Mikael Danielian lodged an appeal against this decision, but no decision was made on his appeal by the end of the year.

Freedom of expression

- On 30 April, Argishti Kiviryan, a lawyer and journalist, was severely beaten by a group of unidentified men outside his home in Yerevan. The attackers reportedly beat him with sticks and attempted to shoot him. The OSCE Representative for Media Freedom called on the authorities to investigate the attack and expressed concern about the lack of investigations into violent attacks against journalists, contributing to a climate of impunity. In July, two suspects were detained. The investigation was ongoing at the end of the year.

Discrimination – Jehovah's Witnesses

Alternative civilian service to conscription continued to be under the control of the military. Conscientious objectors had to wear military uniform, were disciplined by the Military Prosecutor's office and were forbidden to hold prayer meetings. As of 1 November, 71 Jehovah's Witnesses were serving prison sentences of 24 to 36 months for refusing to perform military service on grounds of conscience.

In October, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that there had not been a violation of the right to freedom of conscience and religion when Vahan Bayatyan was sentenced to two and a half years' imprisonment for his refusal to perform military service on religious grounds. The Court held that "the right of conscientious objection was not guaranteed by any article of the Convention". In a dissenting opinion, one of the Court judges stated that the judgement failed to reflect the almost universal acceptance that the right to conscientious objection is fundamental to the rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Vahan Bayatyan is currently appealing to the Grand Chamber against this ruling.

