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Armenia

REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA

Head of State	Robert Kocharian
Head of government	Serge Sarkisian (replaced Andranik Markarian 4 April 2007)
Death penalty	abolitionist for all crimes
Population	3 million
Life expectancy	71.7 years
Under-5 mortality (m/f)	36/31 per 1,000
Adult literacy	99.4 per cent

Freedoms of assembly and expression were restricted. One person died in custody in disputed circumstances. Physical assaults on Jehovah's Witnesses were reportedly not investigated. The authorities failed to introduce a genuinely civilian alternative to military service and conscientious objectors continued to be imprisoned.

Freedom of expression threatened

There were widespread and credible reports of restrictions on the right to freedom of assembly. Opposition parties reported abuses of administrative bureaucracy during the May parliamentary election campaign to obstruct legal demonstrations. In May and October police used force to disperse peaceful demonstrations by opposition parties.

- In June Gagik Shamshian, a freelance journalist with two opposition newspapers, received a suspended sentence of two and a half years for fraud, reduced on appeal to one year. He was charged after he reported being attacked by people linked to the mayor of Nubarashen suburb, Yerevan, in July 2006. Proceedings against his alleged attackers were closed in February.
- In October, newspaper editors Nikol Pashinian and Shogher Matevosian were arrested after participating in a march in central Yerevan with supporters of the former President Levon Ter-Petrosian, a vocal critic of the government.
- On 13 December there was an explosion at the offices of the opposition newspaper Chorrord Ishkhanutyun (Fourth Power). Also in December, the Gyumri-based television channel Gala TV faced harassment from the authorities following its broadcasting of Levon Ter-Petrosian's campaigning activities, allegedly in spite of official warnings not to do so.

Death in custody

- In May Levon Gulyan, a Yerevan restaurant owner, died in custody at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, after two days of questioning as a possible witness to a fatal shooting outside his restaurant. The authorities claimed he died as a result of falling from a window while attempting either escape or suicide. Levon Gulyan's relatives rejected these explanations. Following his initial detention Levon Gulyan was permitted to return home briefly, during which time relatives alleged they had seen bruises on his body. The official forensic examination carried out by the Prosecutor's Office supported the Ministry's claims. Autopsies carried out by international experts were inconclusive.

Impunity

Representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Yerevan reported that physical assaults against their members were not adequately investigated by police.

- In February Jehovah's Witnesses Ruben Khachaturian and Narine Gevorgian were allegedly beaten and threatened by neighbours in the Shengavit suburb of Yerevan. They said that the police failed to initiate a prompt investigation.

Prisoners of conscience

The Armenian authorities failed to introduce a civilian alternative to compulsory military service, an obligation undertaken on joining the Council of Europe.

Imprisonment of conscientious objectors, all Jehovah's Witnesses, continued. In September there were reportedly 82 Jehovah's Witnesses in detention, a record number. Numbers of conscientious objectors imprisoned increased due to successful prosecution appeals for maximum sentences and greater reluctance to grant parole.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported further problems on release due to the authorities' refusal to grant them certification of fulfilment of service, without which important documents such as passports and internal residence permits were harder to obtain.

Amnesty International visit/report

- Amnesty International representatives visited Armenia in March.
- Europe and Central Asia: Summary of Amnesty International's concerns in the region, July-December 2006 (EUR 01/001/2007)