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Armenia: Limited Justice for Police Violence

(Yerevan) – The [Armenian](#) government has failed to ensure full accountability for police violence against largely peaceful protesters and journalists a year ago, Human Rights Watch said today. At the same time the authorities have indicted at least 32 protesters, convicting 21 of them, with 11 sentenced to prison.

On several nights in July 2016, largely peaceful, anti-government protests took place in the Armenian capital, Yerevan. At some protests, [the authorities used excessive force](#), assaulting many demonstrators as well as journalists reporting on the events. Authorities arbitrarily detained many protest leaders and hundreds of participants, pressing unjustified criminal charges against some. No officials have been prosecuted.

“A year after Yerevan’s July protests, victims of police violence are still waiting for justice and accountability,” said [Giorgi Gogia](#), South Caucasus director at Human Rights Watch. “The public’s trust in police and the justice system is severely shaken, and an effective accountability process is essential for restoring it.”

The protests erupted after armed men from a radical opposition group, Founding Parliament, violently seized a Yerevan police station on July 17, 2016. They are alleged to have killed three policemen and taken hostages. Before the gunmen surrendered on July 31, public support for them and disaffection with the government grew into a protest movement, with almost nightly demonstrations in the capital.

The police response was heavy-handed at times. At a July 29 protest in the neighborhood of the seized police station, police fired stun grenades into peaceful crowds, causing first- and second-degree burns and fragmentation wounds on some demonstrators and journalists. Police did not give proper warning or attempt to use other less violent means to disperse the crowd. Police, and unidentified people in civilian clothes acting with them, attacked protesters and some journalists, punching, kicking, and beating them with wooden clubs and iron bars.

Police arbitrarily detained [hundreds](#) of protesters between July 17 and 31, and beat many detainees, in some cases severely. Police did not allow some detainees to get prompt medical care for their injuries. Police held some people for up to 12 hours without documenting the detentions, including holding more than 100 people overnight in a gymnasium. Authorities denied many detainees’ basic rights, including prompt access to a lawyer of their choosing and the opportunity to inform a relative of their detention and whereabouts.

The authorities promptly opened an investigation into the police misconduct, but the investigation has led to limited accountability, Human Rights Watch said. No criminal charges have been brought against any law enforcement officials.

Some police have faced disciplinary actions that included dismissals. In early August 2016, authorities [fired](#) the Yerevan police chief for “failing to prevent violent attacks on protesters and journalists,” and [suspended or reprimanded](#) at least 17 other officials. Following internal inquiries police also sent several cases to the Special

Investigation Service, the government agency responsible for investigating crimes committed by law enforcement.

However, in December 2016, President Serge Sarkisyan awarded the Yerevan deputy police chief, who participated in police operations against protesters on July 29, a medal for “[excellent maintenance](#) of public order.”

“Commending an official for his role in a police operation that involved excessive force and serious injuries to protesters and journalists raises serious questions about the government’s commitment to accountability,” Gogia said.

Armenian authorities have aggressively prosecuted protest participants and leaders. Of the 21 people convicted, 11 received prison terms ranging from one to three-and-a-half years, seven received conditional sentences, and three were fined. Most pleaded guilty, in part to be guaranteed a speedy trial, a lesser sentence than the maximum allowed by law, or both, their lawyers said. Charges included using violence during mass disorder and interfering with the work of a journalist.

Trials of 10 protesters are ongoing. They face charges of using life-threatening violence against officers on duty during the July 19 protest in Yerevan.

The trial of Andreas Ghukasyan, one of the leaders of the July 29 protest, is expected to begin soon. He is charged [with organizing mass disorder during the demonstration](#). At least four other men who were particularly vocal and active in the July 29 protests are under investigation for the same alleged crime.

Ghukasyan has been [in pretrial detention for one year](#). During that time, the authorities brought additional charges against him, related to his alleged intention to support and join the gunmen in the police station.

“The government should make publicly available any credible evidence that justifies the serious criminal charges against the protest organizers and participants,” Gogia said. “The authorities should not seek to prosecute protesters and impose long prison sentences in retaliation for their vocal, but peaceful activism.”