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Amnesty International Annual Report 2011 - Armenia

Head of state: **Serzh Sargsyan**
 Head of government: **Tigran Sargsyan**
 Death penalty: **abolitionist for all crimes**
 Population: **3.1 million**
 Life expectancy: **74.2 years**
 Under-5 mortality (m/f): **29/25 per 1,000**
 Adult literacy: **99.5 per cent**

Perpetrators of human rights violations continued to enjoy impunity. Protection for women and girls still failed to meet international standards. No genuine civilian alternative to military service was introduced.

Deaths in custody

Following its visit to Armenia in September, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention expressed concern about ill-treatment and beatings of detainees and prisoners. It also expressed concern over detainees being pressured in order to extract confessions.

- In April, Vahan Khalafian died in hospital hours after being detained at the police precinct in Charentsavan on charges of theft. The authorities claimed that he had stabbed himself after being ill-treated by police officers but his family disputed the suicide account. In November, two police officers were sentenced for abuse of official authority, which allegedly caused the suicide; one to eight years' imprisonment and his subordinate to two years' suspended sentence.

Impunity

At the end of the year there had still been no independent inquiry into allegations of excessive use of force against members of the public during post-election protests in 2008; no one had been brought to justice in connection with 10 deaths, including of two police officers, that occurred during the violent demonstrations. The families of nine victims initiated proceedings against the General Prosecutor's Office for failing to investigate the deaths. The General Jurisdiction Court dismissed their complaints and its decisions were upheld by the Appeal Court and the Supreme Court.

Freedom of expression

In November, Nikol Pashinian, an opposition activist and editor-in-chief of *Haikakan Zhamanak*, was reportedly assaulted by unidentified men while serving a revised prison sentence of three years and 11 months. He was originally sentenced in January to seven years' imprisonment on charges of organizing mass disorder in 2008. He continued to write articles for his newspaper while in detention. His lawyer reported that Nikol Pashinian had earlier been threatened with harm unless he stopped exposing in his newspaper allegedly corrupt practices in the penitentiary system. Following the assault, the journalist was moved to another prison.

Violence against women and girls

In March, the government set up the State Interagency Committee to Combat Gender-Based Violence following a decree by the Prime Minister. However, no progress had been made by the government on enacting legislation specifically addressing violence against women and the setting up of shelters, contrary to a 2009 CEDAW recommendation. There was currently only one shelter in the country, run by the NGO, Women's Rights Centre, with foreign donor funding.

In October, 20-year-old Zaruhi Petrosian, a victim of ongoing domestic violence, died, reportedly after being severely beaten by her husband and mother-in-law. According to her sister, Zaruhi Petrosian had approached police on two occasions to report the abuse and seek help but they reportedly dismissed her case as "unimportant" and "irrelevant". Following extensive publicity about the case, the authorities arrested her husband and charged him with "causing wilfully heavy damage to health".

Prisoners of conscience

At the end of the year, 73 men were serving prison sentences for refusing to do military service on grounds of conscience. The alternative service remained under military control. In November the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights considered an appeal by the conscientious objector Vahan Bayatyan against the Court's 2009 ruling that his right to freedom of conscience and religion had not been violated when he was convicted of evading the draft in 2002. In 2009, the Court held that the Convention did not guarantee the right of conscientious objection; a dissenting judge issued an opinion stating that the majority's finding failed to reflect that the right to conscientious objection is almost universally accepted to be fundamental to the rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

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