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The State of the World's Human Rights; Armenia 2023

Background

Public discontent and protests grew over the government's handling of tensions with neighbouring Azerbaijan, including Azerbaijan's blockade and military takeover of its breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region populated by ethnic Armenians (see Azerbaijan entry). An influx of more than 100,000 refugees from Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region added to economic and humanitarian hardships. Relations with Russia, which Armenia had regarded as its security guarantor, sharply deteriorated, while the economy remained heavily dependent on Russia, including for basic imports and remittances. In December, Armenia freed two Azerbaijani prisoners of war after agreeing to work towards a peace deal with Azerbaijan.

Excessive use of force

Street protests were widespread, with incidents of violence by protesters as well as unnecessary, disproportionate and sometimes indiscriminate use of force by the police regularly reported.

On 19 September, thousands gathered in the capital, Yerevan, to demand the resignation of the prime minister and protest against Azerbaijan's military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. Some protesters broke windows in government buildings and clashed with police. The Helsinki Committee of Armenia, an NGO monitoring the protests, reported that police at times used "disproportionate and indiscriminate force" including beatings and firing stun grenades directly into the crowd without warning. More than 140 protesters were reportedly detained and more than 30 were injured. Most protesters were released without charge, while some faced administrative and criminal proceedings. By year's end there had been no effective investigation into the reports of unlawful use of force by the police.

Freedom of expression

The media environment remained largely free and pluralistic, but was deeply polarized over the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh and conflict with Azerbaijan. International observers also reported an unprecedented level of disinformation and hate speech. In March, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) welcomed the decriminalization in July 2022 of the provision which punished insulting government officials and public figures. Concerns remained regarding the safety of journalists who continued to be regularly subjected to pressure, insults and violence by government supporters. At least two journalists reported being subjected to an intense campaign of online harassment and threats, including by some public officials, after their critical questioning of the prime minister about events in Nagorno-Karabakh at a press conference on 25 July. The investigation into this alleged interference with journalistic activities was ongoing at year's end.

The government's attempts to restrict free expression online were deterred after draft amendments proposed in December 2022 were put on hold following international criticism. The amendments would have given the government the power to censor online content, block websites and curb internet access under martial law.

Violations of international humanitarian law

No substantive progress was made in investigations into war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law during the 2020 armed conflict with Azerbaijan and its immediate aftermath, or in bringing suspected perpetrators to justice. On 3 October, parliament voted to ratify the Rome Statute of the ICC.

Landmines previously planted by Armenian forces in and around Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan continued to pose a lethal threat and prevented the safe return of displaced people. According to Azerbaijan's de-mining agency, as of August the number of people wounded or killed by landmines since the war in 2020 had reached 303, including civilians. In July, Azerbaijani media reported that the minefield maps provided by Armenia were only 25% accurate and that maps for 600,000 mines were still missing.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

More than 100,000 people, virtually the entire ethnic Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, were displaced to Armenia within a few days in September and October. Armenian authorities largely met the temporary needs of this rapid influx of a large number of refugees. Concerns remained, however, regarding durable solutions and access to adequate housing, income and employment.

Right to a fair trial

Several lawyers reported being harassed and ill-treated while visiting their clients in police detention centres and performing their professional duties.

Lawyers Marzpet Avagyan and Emanuel Ananyan described how on 9 February a group of police officers insulted, kicked and punched them at the police department of Yerevan. The lawyers alleged that they were assaulted while defending the rights of their clients who were minors and had also been subjected to torture or other ill-treatment by the same police officers.

LGBTI people's rights

Discrimination against LGBTI people and social stigma based on a person's real or perceived sexuality remained commonplace.

In its report adopted in March, ECRI noted that LGBTI people in Armenia continued to face discrimination, marginalization, attacks and bullying. It recommended swift adoption of legal sanctions for discrimination on all grounds, including sexual orientation and gender identity, removing the stigma of mental disorder from same-sex sexual orientation, and countering other forms of homophobic discourse.

Right to a healthy environment

In February, authorities announced that production at the Almusar gold mine would resume despite outstanding concerns about potential environmental damage. Activists opposing the project continued to be harassed, including through lawsuits seeking excessive financial compensation for their environmental criticism.

Death Penalty

In October, Armenia ratified Protocol No. 13 of the European Convention on Human Rights, thereby completing abolition of the death penalty in all circumstances, including for crimes committed in times of war and imminent threat of war.