

Press release - 046(2011)

Armenia: "Greater efforts must be made to heal the wounds of March 2008 and strengthen the protection of human rights"

Yerevan, 21.01.2011 – Issues related to the events of March 2008, freedom of expression and of the media, and human rights in the army were the main themes of the visit to Armenia from 18 to 21 January 2011 by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg.

The effects of the tragic events of March 2008 can still be felt in Armenian society. A major problem is the continuing lack of clarity as regards the responsibility for the ten deaths which occurred at during the demonstrations. The Commissioner urged that the responsibility for these deaths be established; this presupposes a thorough, impartial and credible analysis of the methods used by the police as well as the command responsibility. The Commissioner has recommended concrete measures to address the needs of the families of the victims.

The Armenian National Congress indicated to the Commissioner that nine persons affiliated with them remain imprisoned, most of them in connection with the events of March 2008. The Commissioner discussed this issue with the Armenian authorities.

The ad hoc parliamentary inquiry committee, which was established to examine the March 2008 events and identify ways to prevent the recurrence of a similar tragedy, formulated certain recommendations of a systemic nature. Moreover, the OSCE/ODIHR Trial Monitoring Report identified several shortcomings in the conduct of the trials related to the March 2008 events. A thorough follow-up of the recommendations made by the ad hoc parliamentary inquiry committee and by OSCE/ODIHR should be ensured, in particular with regard to ongoing reform of the police (including the use of force by the police), ensuring that the judiciary is independent and competent, and guaranteeing the right to liberty and to a fair trial. In addition, the legislation and practice on freedom of assembly should be brought fully in line with international human rights principles.

The Commissioner discussed the case of A1+ television, which had been the subject of a judgment of the European Court of Human Rights where the court had found a violation of the right of freedom of expression. During a recent competition for a broadcasting license, the bid of A1+ was once again rejected; the reasoning given in the decision of the National Commission on Radio and Television was that the documentation which had been submitted by A1+ contained fraudulent documents. The Commissioner stressed the importance of ensuring that the media environment in Armenia is sufficiently diverse and pluralistic. He noted the work to amend the Law on Television and Radio and trusts that the question of the independence and pluralistic membership of the regulatory authorities will be addressed.

The Commissioner also had the opportunity to look into the human rights situation in the army. He expressed particular concern regarding non-combat deaths, ill-treatment and hazing, and highlighted the importance of conducting effective investigations into these cases with the aim of identifying and punishing those responsible. The Commissioner encouraged the ongoing reforms taking place in the armed forces, including in relation to disciplinary procedures and the establishment of effective complaint mechanisms. He also addressed the issue of the right to conscientious objection during his visit and understands that the Armenian authorities are in the process of developing the legislation in this area. The objective should be to establish a genuinely civilian service.

The Commissioner will further discuss and assess the issues tackled during his visit. A report will be published in the coming months.

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The Commissioner for Human Rights is an independent, non-judicial institution within the Council of Europe, mandated to promote awareness of, and respect for, human rights in the 47 member states of the Organisation.

Elected by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the present Commissioner, Mr Thomas Hammarberg, took up his function on 1 April 2006