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Armenia: “More efforts are needed to strengthen human rights protection”

Strasbourg, 09.05.2011 – “Some significant steps have been taken to address the human rights consequences of the March 2008 events, but more needs to be done to promote reconciliation in society and reinforce public trust towards the authorities”, said the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg, releasing today a [report](#) on his visit to Armenia carried out in January 2011. The report focuses on human rights issues related to the March 2008 events, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and association, and the human rights situation in the army.

The Commissioner considers that the use of force on 1-2 March 2008 was excessive and that the investigation into the ten deaths has not been effective. “None of the perpetrators have been identified to date. Command responsibility of senior officials within the police and the security services appears not to have been seriously considered. The Armenian authorities should pursue vigorously these investigations and bring all those responsible to account. The families of the ten victims should receive adequate compensation for the loss of their relatives and should be fully associated to and informed about the investigation.” The Commissioner welcomes the recent instruction from President Sargsyan with regard to the investigation into the death cases and hopes that this will be translated into concrete progress in identifying and punishing those responsible.

While welcoming the release of many of those deprived of their liberty in connection to the March 2008 events, three of whom were released after his visit, the Commissioner continues to have serious concerns about the situation of remaining imprisoned opposition activists and urges the Armenian authorities to release them.

The report also pays particular attention to freedom of expression, including freedom and diversity of the media. While welcoming the decriminalisation of libel and insult through last year’s amendments to the Criminal Code, the Commissioner remains concerned about the increase of cases brought against media outlets on the basis of amendments to the Civil Code. He stresses that unreasonably high fines in civil cases relating to media should be avoided. At the same time, ethical standards for journalism and a system of self-regulation should be encouraged.

Expressing alarm over the attacks and pressure on journalists that have taken place in the past two years, the Commissioner calls upon the country’s leadership to firmly condemn such incidents and to take measures to prevent their recurrence.

The implementation in practice of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in Armenia also remains a source of concern. “Unlawful and disproportionate impediments on peaceful assemblies, such as intimidation and arrest of participants, disruption of transportation means and blanket prohibitions against assemblies in certain places, should be immediately discontinued. It is crucial that the behaviour and actions of police forces during assemblies abide by human rights standards.”

Commissioner Hammarberg therefore encourages the Armenian authorities to review the national legal framework and practice related to freedom of expression, freedom of the media

and freedom of assembly in order to bring it in compliance with human rights standards.

The report also addresses the issue of non-combat deaths, torture and ill treatment which have occurred in the Armenian army and have featured prominently in the country's public debate. "The Armenian authorities should intensify their efforts to eliminate such grave cases of abuse in the military and to put an end to the impunity of perpetrators and responsible commanders."

There is also an urgent need to review the Law on Alternative Service and to create a genuinely civilian service option, whose length should not be perceived as punitive, deterrent or discriminatory. Finally, the Commissioner strongly recommends releasing all conscientious objectors who are in prison because of non-performance of military service.

The response of the authorities of Armenia is attached to the report.

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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