



The South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders

The South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders unites 30 human rights NGOs in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The Network seeks to facilitate creation of a safer and enabling environment for human rights defenders in the South Caucasus and to strengthen their voices in the region and internationally.

Political prisoners' solidarity day statement

30 October, 2009

On the 30th of October – International Day of Solidarity to Political Prisoners the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders expresses its deep solidarity to those who face imprisonment or other forms of persecution on political grounds in any country regardless of frontiers.

The Network expresses particular concern that political prisoners exist in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and call upon the governments of these countries to release these people and to stop persecuting people on political grounds.

“Although Constitutions of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia formally guarantee the rights of individuals to participate in public and political life without discrimination, people are still persecuted, threatened and suppressed based on their political activities and/or opinions in these countries” – says Ana Natsvlishvili, HRIDC lawyer and Network coordinator in Georgia.

The Council of Europe has appointed a special reporter on the issue of political prisoners in Azerbaijan; in Armenia the process is under way. In Georgia national human rights groups, including Human Rights Center have time and again reported cases of detention and harassment of people on political grounds. Recently, the fact-finding mission of International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) has acknowledged the existence of political prisoners in Georgia.

Armenia: Currently, there are at least seventeen political prisoners who have been imprisoned in the course of contested presidential elections of February 2008 leading to mass public demonstrations and their crackdown by the government on March 1, 2008. Ten people were killed, hundreds of opposition supporters were arrested, and many more were forced into hiding.

Recently the president of Armenia issued an amnesty and released a number of people detained during the March 1 events however seventeen men still remain in prison. All of these men have been convicted unjustly, many solely on the basis of police testimony. Yet they face sentences of up to nine years in prison.

“The sordid partial amnesty, in which many of the political prisoners were released, was no substitute for justice. On the occasion of October 30, Political Prisoners' Day, we join the families of the seventeen political prisoners in calling for the immediate release of their husbands and fathers, sons and brothers. We join the families of the victims of March 1 in calling for justice for their loved ones so tragically lost. We demand an end to political repression in Armenia” stated the Network member organizations.

Azerbaijan: In Azerbaijan there are tens of people considered to be political prisoners by local and international human rights groups. The long list includes journalists, political and party activists, relatives of political activists, etc. The Network is particularly concerned about the 5 imprisoned journalists in Azerbaijan Fatullayev, Zahidov, Guseinov, Allahverdiev and Alibeili and two bloggers Adnan Hajizade and Amin Abdulaev, all in relation with their journalistic activities. Fatullayev, Zahidov, Guseinov have been recognized as political prisoners by most of the national and international organizations. Amnesty International recognized Fatullayev and Zahidov as prisoners of conscious.

On October 27 civil society representatives and former political prisoners decided to appeal to the President of Azerbaijan to release political prisoners as a step towards national reconciliation and democratization of the country.

“Political prisoners are hostages of the civil war which is constantly conducted in the country from the end of 1980.th Release of political prisoners is necessary to overcome the confrontational approach to relations of the authorities and opposition which leads to replenishment of prisons during every parliamentary and presidential election,” says Eldar Zeinalov, executive director of Human Rights Center in Azerbaijan.

Georgia: In Georgia local human rights defenders have documented tens of cases when founders or activists of government opposition, influential individuals linked to the opposition and/or their relatives are detained

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Human Rights House Foundation (Oslo, Norway) is the international partner of the Network.

based on ill-grounded accusations and the evidence which often are fabricated (planted weapons or drugs, etc.). Moreover, very often detainees assert that in informal talks the authorities themselves acknowledge political motives behind their detention and bargain with them with release in exchange of quitting political activities. Kvitsiani, Ratiani, Kutsnashvili, Okruashvili (granted political asylum in France) are just some of the examples.

Political demonstrations against the current government launched in April this year witnessed a new wave of repressions on political grounds. A number of people imprisoned in those days have been released on bail as a result of political negotiations between the authorities and opposition political leaders; however a number of them still remain behind the bars.

The members of ***the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders*** consider that reemergence of political prisoners two decades after the fall of Soviet Union in our countries is unacceptable.

The members of ***the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders*** call upon the governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia:

- to release all political prisoners in their countries
- stop persecutions on political grounds

The members of ***the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders*** call upon the Council of Europe, EU missions and other international organizations

- to send their fact-finding missions or representatives to examine the issue of political prisoners in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia
- to pay special attention to concerns about politically motivated trials repeatedly raised by local human rights defenders in all three countries and send their representatives to monitor such trials.