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ARTICLE 19

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South Caucasus: Continued Violence Against Journalists Symptomatic of Ongoing Repression in the Region

ARTICLE 19 is becoming increasingly concerned that acts of violence against journalists in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are on the rise. Previous attacks have seen a lack of independent and prompt investigation, creating a climate of impunity for the perpetrators and fear amongst journalists working in these countries.

In recent weeks Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have seen an increasing number of physical attacks on journalists and media workers, especially those covering politically sensitive issues such as opposition rallies in Georgia and the recent call for the cancellation of the “Flower Holiday”¹ in Azerbaijan.

In **Armenia**, the most recent assault took place on 6 May, when Nver Mnatsakanian, a prominent television anchor and host at *Shant TV*, was attacked and beaten by unknown assailants outside his home in Yerevan.

ARTICLE 19 specifically calls on the Armenian authorities to condemn any attacks on journalists and to undertake to end all attacks. In order to prevent other attacks, ARTICLE 19 also urges the government to fully investigate all violent incidents, thereby sending a clear message that such abuses will not be tolerated.

In **Azerbaijan**, police used physical force against Durna Safarli, *Radio Liberty* correspondent; Elchin Hasanov, from *Yukselish Namina*; and Afgan Mukhtarli and Layla Ilgar from *Yeni Musavat* newspaper on 10 May 2009 while they were covering events surrounding the “Flower Holiday”.

ARTICLE 19 urges the Azerbaijan government to set up an independent investigation into the police violence surrounding this year’s “Flower Holiday” and promptly investigate police attacks on journalists and peaceful protesters. Members of the public were beaten and approximately 50 demonstrators were detained for a number of hours on this day, simply for exercising their right to free expression.

ARTICLE 19 also calls for a complete disclosure of the findings of the investigation into the killing of 13 people at the State Oil Academy in Baku on 30 April 2009. The Azerbaijani

¹The “Flower Holiday” is an annual celebration of the birthday of former President Geydar Aliyev on 10 May. This year students called for it to be cancelled, to commemorate 13 people killed at the State Oil Academy in Baku on 30 April 2009. Journalists attempting to investigate these killings were also prevented from accessing information by authorities.

public has the right to know what happened and who was responsible for this unprecedented massacre.

In **Georgia**, journalists covering political opposition activities have reportedly been subject to police ill-treatment. These included, for example, Nino Komakhidze and Ani Khavtasi from *The Versia* newspaper who were covering an opposition movement protest on 7 April. They were allegedly also part of another group of journalists who were assaulted on 6 May, when violence erupted outside a Tbilisi police station.

ARTICLE 19 urges the Georgian government to conduct a prompt and independent investigation into the alleged police attacks. We also call on the Georgian authorities not to repeat the excessive use of force used to quell demonstrators in November 2007, including the beating of journalists by police.

ARTICLE 19 notes that Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which both guarantee the fundamental right to freedom of expression, including the protection of journalists.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more detailed information on individual cases, please refer to the attached appendix.
- Please contact Nathalie Losekoot, Senior Programme Officer, Europe, at nathalie@article19.org or +44 207 239 1193
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.

Appendix: List of Individual Journalists Attacked in South Caucasus

Armenia

On 6 May 2009 Nver Mnatsakanian of *Shant TV* was beaten by unknown assailants, suffering injuries to his head, feet and hands.

On 30 April 2009, Argishti Kiviryan, the founding editor of *Armenia Today*, was severely beaten with wooden batons across the face and body on his way home from work. He was hospitalised in a serious condition. According to eyewitnesses the attackers also shot at Kiviryan, although he was not hit.

These attacks follow on from previous incidents. In August 2008, Lusine Barsegian from *Haikakan Zhamanak* and Hrach Melkumyan, *Radio Liberty* acting director, were attacked and hospitalised in separate events. Edik Baghdasarian, editor of the news magazine *Hetq*, was also assaulted in November 2008. The editor-in-chief of *Iskakan Iravunk* newspaper, Hovhannes Galajian, has been severely assaulted twice, in 2006 and again in 2007. Even though Armenian police authorities have vowed to end the spate of recent attacks, no one has so far been found guilty.

Azerbaijan

On 10 May 2009, Durna Safarli, *Radio Liberty* correspondent, Elchin Hasanov, an employee of *Yukselish Namina*, and Afgan Mukhtarli and Layla Ilgar of *Yeni Musavat* were the victims of police force while covering events surrounding the “Flower Holiday”.

On 26 April, *ANS TV* correspondents Nijat Suleymanov, Elmin Muradov and Azer Balayev reported that they were subjected to ill-treatment by police when trying to report on the destruction of a building.

Assaults, including the murder of journalists, have continued to take place with impunity in Azerbaijan. The government’s failure to meaningfully investigate violence or threats of violence, thus implicitly condoning them, is illustrated by the fact that the 2005 murder of Elmar Huseynov, the editor-in-chief of the *Monitor*, remains unsolved. In 2008 alone, there were at least 49 incidents involving verbal or physical assaults on journalists.

These include four separate attacks, including the stabbing of *Azadlyg* reporter, Agil Khalil, who was later subject to a smear campaign on government-controlled television. Sergei Strekalin was sentenced for the attack although Khalil denies he was the person who attacked him. As a result of more attacks, Khalil was forced to flee the country by the end of 2008.

Hakimeldostu Mehdiyev, correspondent for the Institute for Reporters’ Freedom and Safety (IRFS) in the Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan (situated within Azerbaijan) has also been subjected to several attacks, the latest in January 2009, when he was hit with a ceramic ashtray in the face. He had been filming a gathering of the political opposition. No criminal investigation has been initiated to date. In March 2009, he had a car crash after his car was allegedly tampered with.

Idrak Abbasov, another journalist for IRFS, was hospitalised with heart problems on 20 February 2009 after returning from Nakhchivan where he stated he was subjected to physical and psychological abuse by the National Security Ministry (NSM).

In June 2008, the journalist Emin Huseynov was detained and assaulted by police, after which he was hospitalised for 24 days, and continues to receive treatment. Court proceedings in the case are ongoing.

Georgia

Attacks on journalists have become increasingly common. On 7 April, police reportedly ill treated Nino Komakhidze, a journalist, and Ani Khavtasi, a photo-journalist from *The Versia* newspaper, when they covered an opposition movement protest.

On 6 May, the abovementioned journalists, together with Salome Kokiashvili, a Public Broadcasting correspondent, Zaza Shukvani, a *Kavkasia* TV Company cameraman, and Levan Kalandia, a *Rustavi 2* cameraman, were seriously injured in a violent episode that erupted when opposition supporters clashed with police – who allegedly used truncheons and rubber bullets – outside a police station in Tbilisi.