



Honourable Mr. Nikol Pashinyan
Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia
Yerevan, Armenia

Copy to:
Mr. Artak Zeynalyan
Minister of Justice of the Republic of Armenia
Yerevan, Armenia

Oslo, March 21, 2019

Re: Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Armenia

Honourable Mr. Prime Minister,

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC) wants to pay its respect to you and your difficult task of improving the economic conditions and strengthening respect for human rights, democratic values and rule of law in the Republic of Armenia. The NHC has been following developments in your country for a long time and supporting the work of independent civil society organisations. The NHC was present during the April 2018 Velvet revolution as well as during the peaceful parliamentary elections in December 2018. We are pleased to see efforts of the government of Armenia to strengthen democracy.

However, in this letter we want to express our concerns regarding the situation of human rights defenders in your country. According to information available to us, some of the bravest human rights defenders still experience discrimination, harassment and threats. This is especially true about defenders working to improve the human rights situation of one of vulnerable groups in the society, such as women and LGBTI people.

As an example of such intimidations, we refer to recent threats posed against Ms. Lara Aharonian, who is a co-director of *The Women Resource Centre in Armenia*, working to strengthen the rights of women in Armenia. Ms. Aharonian lately became a subject of numerous calls to violence against her, including rape and death threats. The calls against her were posted on social media along with her photo. In addition, she received private messages from fake accounts. As we understand, this happened only because of her efforts to improve women's rights in the country.

Ms. Aharonian's problem is not a stand-alone case as over the course of a short time we have seen several attacks and harassments directed against human rights defenders in your country. In November 2018, the threats by hate groups propaganda were made against the humanitarian NGO *New Generation*, which had to cancel the 11th International LGBT Christian Forum devoted to peace,

respect, and love in Yerevan. In August 2018, more than 30 people attacked nine gay-rights activists in Armenia's Syunik region.

Unfortunately, Armenian authorities did not take efficient actions to protect the activists.

Under international law, human rights activists are entitled to protection by the Armenian police. Armenia is also a cosponsor of a resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on 24 December 2017 on the 20th Anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights. In the resolution, the General Assembly calls upon all States to take all measures necessary to ensure the rights and safety of all persons, including human rights defenders.

It also urges States to acknowledge the important and legitimate role of human rights defenders, in the promotion of all human rights, democracy and the rule of law by duly investigating and condemning publicly all cases of violence and discrimination against them, including women human rights defenders, underlining that such practices can never be justified.

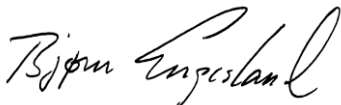
Based on long-term experience, we believe that creating a safe environment for human rights defenders as well as conducting effective investigation of violence against them are among the cornerstones in building democracy.

We would therefore recommend that the government of Armenia take effective steps to:

1. Ensure effective protection of the rights and safety of human rights defenders in the country;
2. Publicly address threats and harassments against human rights defenders in Armenia, including against Ms. Lara Aharonian;
3. Carry out prompt, thorough and impartial investigations of all allegations of threats, harassment and violence against human rights defenders.

Sincerely yours,

Bjørn Engesland
Secretary General



Gunnar Ekeløve-Slydal
Deputy Secretary General

