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Georgia: Authorities must stop violence against opposition ahead of elections

As Georgians prepare to vote in parliamentary elections in October, Amnesty International is concerned that the authorities are failing to protect the opposition supporters and journalists from what appears to be politically targeted violence.

The organization is calling on the Georgian government to ensure freedom of expression and association of all persons regardless of their political views or association and to bring those responsible for the recent attacks to justice following a thorough, impartial and effective investigation.

In recent weeks several public meetings of the opposition coalition 'Georgian Dream' have been curtailed by the outbreak of fighting. Opposition leaders say that local council workers and Ministry of Internal Affairs officials were involved in the incidents, suggesting that some of these incidents were orchestrated by the authorities.

On 12 July a group of Georgian Dream activists travelled to Karaleti, central Georgia, to visit a settlement for people displaced as a result of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. According to eyewitness and media reports, several local residents of the Karaleti settlement started verbally insulting the activists and demanding that they leave the place. Clashes ensued as verbal altercations turned physical.

Several video recordings of the meeting show residents throwing stones at representatives of the coalition and the media, while one of the men accompanying a coalition leader is seen wielding a gun as he covers the retreat of opposition activists from the scene.

13 people, ten of them journalists, were injured and were subsequently treated in Gori hospital. Saba Tsitsikashvili, one of the injured journalists, has stated that he recognized local municipality employees among those who beat him.

The Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs issued a statement on 14 July, according to which six persons (four opposition supporters and two residents of Karaleti, including one of the council employees who assaulted Saba Tsitsikashvili) were arrested and given 15 days administrative detention in relation to the incident. However, a lawyer from the 'Georgian Dream' coalition told Amnesty International that four individuals, allegedly connected with the ruling party, who directed and participated in the attack, have not been brought to justice despite photo and video evidence that incriminates them.

On 26 June a similar incident took place in Mereti, Shida Kartli region, central Georgia. As opposition activists attempted to hold a meeting, a fistfight broke out, preventing the 'Georgian Dream' coalition meeting with locals. As a result of the

confrontation, several people, including a number of journalists, reportedly sustained injuries and two coalition supporters were taken to hospital for treatment. Local media outlets then aired a video which allegedly showed several public employees involved in the incident. On 28 June, the Ombudsperson's office issued a statement, expressing concern that several public servants, including employees of Gori council and the emergency service of the Shida Kartli region, were involved in the violence.¹

Four men – two of them 'Georgian Dream' activists – have been arrested and jailed for ten days in connection with the Mereti incident. However, according to Ombudsman's office, no public servants were held responsible.

In addition to the reports of pro-opposition journalists being assaulted while covering rallies or politically sensitive events, there have been several reports of pro-opposition journalist being harassed and prevented from carrying out their journalistic work by unidentified persons. Pro-opposition journalists have been followed and questioned by unknown individuals who interfere with their work, preventing them from interviewing and filming with intimidating actions and remarks.

Ekaterine Dugladze, a female journalist with pro-opposition news agency INFO 9 in Zestaponi, western Georgia, told Amnesty International that in the last three weeks she has been persistently followed and harassed by a group of seven young men: "They follow me everywhere by car or on foot, preventing me to move freely, interfere with filming, come physically very close when making inappropriate remarks about my work and private life and asking questions in a non-stop manner."²

According to Ekaterine Dugladze, she has not been able to effectively carry on with her journalistic work, as the group of men following her interfere with filming and recording interviews. Despite the fact that she has lodged a formal complaint and appealed both at the local prosecutor and police offices, the group of men to date continue to follow her unhindered.

"There has not been any reaction from police or prosecution, I am forced to continue my work in an intimidating and threatening environment, feeling completely unprotected." She told Amnesty International.

Vasil Dabrundashvili, from the production company Studio GNS, was followed and questioned by the same group of young men while trying to investigate cases of pressure on opposition journalists. On 11 June, when he was visiting Zestaponi to interview Ekaterine Dugladze, the men approached him and prevented him recording of the interview. "Seven men surrounded us as I was trying to record the interview; they did not let me question my interviewee, interrupting the conversation with cynical comments and questions and blocking the camera. We tried to walk away and continue recording at some other place but they kept following us. At the end, my interviewee left without us being able to record the interview."

According to Vasil Dabrundashvili the same group seven men kept following him for hours, asking questions and preventing him moving freely and conducting interviews.

¹ <http://www.ombudsman.ge/index.php?page=1001&lang=1&id=1523>

² The short recording of the video, where group of men are pursuing a journalist is available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=K7eX_AwYTvK#!

“This was all taking place in front of the Zestaponi Police building. I entered the police building and asked the police officer to stop them from following me and interfering with my work as a journalist, however they refused to act on my request” he told Amnesty International. Vasil Dabrundashvili also called on a police patrol for help, however the two policemen that arrived to record a complaint, left abruptly and without any explanation when he requested to see and sign the report of the incident. According to Vasil Dabrundashvili to date no formal investigation has been launched and no-one has been held responsible in connection with the incident. “Judging from the actions of the law enforcement officers, I do not see any prospects of justice being done in this case” He told Amnesty International.

Several similar incidents of interference in journalistic work have been reported this month throughout the Georgian regions. On 6 July, INFO 9 journalist Nina Basishvili was followed and prevented from filming in Gardabani, eastern Georgia. On July 8, another INFO 9 correspondent Natia Rokva was followed by a person with a camera who prevented her from filming and conducting interviews in Guria, western Georgia. Her appeal to the patrol policeman who was standing nearby to stop the person from following and interfering in her journalistic work also reportedly received no reaction. Amnesty International calls on the Georgian authorities to ensure a prompt and thorough investigation into all cases of violence and harassment against journalists. The organization further urges the authorities to ensure that the journalists are able to work unhindered and without the fear of violence regardless of the political affiliation of the media outlets they represent.

Background

Since the entry of billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili into Georgian politics early this year, stringent regulatory and other mechanisms have been employed to control the political and financial activities of his newly formed political coalition ‘Georgian dream’.

The newly formed State Audit Service (SAS), which oversees political party and campaign finances has been accused of “applying a selective and excessively rigid approach” with regard to widespread questioning of opposition supporters and imposing multi-million dollar fines on Bidzina Ivanishvili, the Georgian Dream Coalition, and structures perceived as affiliated.³ The recent confiscation of pro-opposition Global TV⁴ and Maestro TV⁵ satellite dishes on allegations of voter bribing, as well as recent criminal charges against the three coalition members for bypassing party funding regulations⁶ have also been met by criticism from the local democracy and human right organizations .

³ <http://www.osce.org/odihr/91891>

⁴ <http://transparency.ge/en/post/press-release/statement-seizure-global-tv-sat>

⁵ <http://transparency.ge/en/post/general-announcement/this-affects-you-too-statement-maestro>

⁶ http://gyla.ge/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1393%3Agyla-calls-on-the-investigative-authorities-to-avoid-giving-too-broad-and-unreasonable-interpretation-of-law-&catid=45%3Anews-eng&Itemid=1&lang=en