

PUBLIC

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17 March 2003

UA 73/03 **Fear for safety/Unfair trial/Intimidation/ Prisoner of Conscience**

ARMENIA **Artur Sakunts (m), Coordinator of Vanadzor branch of the Helsinki Citizen's**
Assembly

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of members of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (HCA), a human rights group in Vanadzor, northern Armenia. The group's office has been attacked and badly damaged, and Artur Sakunts, the coordinator of the group, has been detained by police.

Amnesty International considers Artur Sakunts a prisoner of conscience, detained for exercising his right to freedom of expression. His detention, together with the attack on the HCA office, has raised fears that the actions are linked to a campaign to intimidate the human rights group and prevent them from carrying out their legitimate work.

Early in the morning of 14 March unidentified individuals broke into the office of the Vanadzor branch of the HCA. They firebombed the building, destroying a large part of the office's equipment.

On 15 March policemen detained Artur Sakunts in the HCA office in Vanadzor, and took him to a local police station. He was tried and sentenced the same day to ten days' detention on charges of disobeying the authorities (Article 182 of the Armenian Administrative Code). Artur Sakunts was not permitted access to a lawyer before or during his trial.

Artur Sakunts was arrested after attempting to organize a public meeting on 15 March concerning the findings of the HCA branch's monitoring of the Armenian presidential elections, which took place on 19 February and 5 March. The mayor of Vanadzor did not grant permission for this meeting to take place. Artur Sakunts and his colleagues decided to go ahead with the meeting without permission, as they considered it their right to conduct a meeting under the Armenian constitution, as well as under Article 20 and 21 of the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights, which was ratified by Armenia in 1993. About 40 people had gathered in and around the office when police broke the meeting up and arrested Artur Sakunts.

The findings of the group's election monitoring are not known. However, Artur Sakunts and his colleagues were reportedly summoned by police before the elections and asked to stop the monitoring process.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Presidential elections in Armenia took place on 19 February. As none of the candidates had more than 50 per cent of the votes, a second round of elections was scheduled for 5 March. International observers from the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) spoke about a number of irregularities during both elections, like for example ballot box stuffing. In a statement, a spokesman for the OSCE said: "I am disappointed. We had hoped for better. Once again we witnessed significant problems on election day and the period between two rounds did not meet international standards for an open and fair political campaign."

The HCA branch in Vanadzor experienced pressure from the authorities prior to the election campaign, when the organization collected information about human rights violations in the Lori region of Armenia.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English, Armenian, Russian or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of members of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly in Vanadzor, who are reportedly being targeted in a campaign to prevent them carrying out their legitimate human rights monitoring work;
- calling for the immediate release of their coordinator Artur Sakunts, imprisoned for exercising his right to freedom of expression;
- expressing concern that Artur Sakunts was denied access to a lawyer during his trial, in breach of international standards on fair trials;
- calling for an immediate and impartial investigation into the break-in and firebombing of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly office in Vanadzor, for the results to be made public and for those responsible to be brought to justice;
- urging the authorities to respect human rights, including the right to assembly and the right to freedom of expression;
- reminding the authorities that the UN Declaration on the Rights and Responsibilities of Individuals, Groups and Institutions to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Liberties recognizes the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders and their right to carry out their activities without any restrictions or fear of reprisals.

APPEALS TO:

President of the Republic of Armenia

Robert KOCHARIAN

Pr. Marshala Bagramiana, 26

375019 g. Yerevan

Republic of Armenia

Telegram: President Kocharian, Yerevan, Armenia

Email: president@president.am

Fax: + 374 1 52 15 81

Salutation: Dear President

Procurator General of the Republic of Armenia

Aram TAMAZIAN

Procurator General of the Republic of Armenia

Pl. Shaumiana

375010 g. Yerevan

Republic of Armenia

Telegram: Procurator General, Yerevan, Armenia

Fax: + 374 1 58 00 01 (if someone answers, repeat "FAX")

Salutation: Dear Procurator General

COPIES TO:

Mayor of Vanadzor

Samvel Darbinian

Mayor of the City of Vanadzor

Vanadzor

Province Lori

Republic of Armenia

Fax:+ 374 51 22250 (if someone answers, repeat "FAX")

Procurator of Vanadzor

Genrikh Kochinian

Procuracy of the City of Vanadzor

Vanadzor

Province Lori

Fax: +374 51 20413

Head of the delegation of Armenia to the Council of Europe

Mr. Hovhannes Hovhanisian

Email: artakin@parliament.am

Head of the delegation of Armenia to the OSCE

His Excellency Jivan Tabibian

zangezur@chello.at

and to diplomatic representatives of Armenia accredited to your country

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 28 April 2003.