

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Bulgarian authorities must protect civil society

Today Amnesty International wrote to the Bulgarian authorities to express concerns over the allegations that law enforcement forces did not intervene to prevent verbal abuse, harassment and threats of violence against Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC), during the 12 September rally organised by a far right political party that ended in front of their main office.

Amnesty International called on the Minister of Interior and the Chief of Sofia Police to ensure that thorough, independent and prompt investigations are carried out into allegations, including a review of the security arrangements put in place by the police for the rally leading to the identification of failures to prevent the commission of criminal acts, and the adoption of necessary measures to remedy any failures identified during the investigations.

The organisation also called on the Prosecutor General and the Chief of Sofia Police to ensure that credible reports of criminal conduct targeting BHC or their guests are promptly and thoroughly investigated.

Amnesty International further urged the authorities to take all necessary measures to ensure the ability of NGOs, including the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, to carry out their work without fear of harassment and intimidation.

The rally took place on 12 September under the slogan “Let’s ban BHC” and was organised by the far-right political party Bulgarian National Union – New Democracy (BNS-ND) and the Facebook group “Fatherland Protection Movement”, as part of the opening of the pre-election campaign. The rally consisted of a convoy of cars that started from Alexander Nevski Boulevard and arrived around 19.00 in front of the BHC headquarters, where an estimated of thirty – forty protesters remained until for approximately fifty minutes.

The demonstrators reportedly carried banners with symbolism used by the BNS-ND party - crossed hammer and sword – associated with the Black Front, a far-right political group active in Germany in the 1930s. During the rally, repeated threats and insults were made towards the organisation and specific employees who were present in the office at the time: “You’re dead”, “If they still haven’t got it, we’re coming back angrier and stronger to make it clearer”, “Put up safety bars ... and buy bullet-proof jackets”, “Expect to be lynched”, “Dirty shitty whore”, “Bastards”, “Monkey”, “We’ll hang you upside down” among others. Calls were also made for the banning of all NGOs in Bulgaria.

Amnesty International was made aware that only four police officers were assigned to accompany the rally and they did not take action to prevent or stop the harassment and verbal assaults.

On the day of the march, BHC wrote to the Sofia Mayor, Yordanka Fandakova, calling on her to ban the march, however the mayor remained unavailable despite of numerous attempted telephone calls. To date, BHC has still not received any response from the municipality.

BACKGROUND

Bulgarian Helsinki Committee is a Sofia-based NGO established in 1992 as an independent organisation for the protection of human rights. The objectives of the NGO are to “promote respect for the human rights of every individual, to stimulate legislative reform to bring Bulgarian legislation in line with international human rights standards, to trigger public debate on human rights, to carry out advocacy for the protection of human rights, and to popularise and made widely available human rights instruments”.

In January 2014, the National Revenue Agency ordered and conducted a tax audit on the BHC’s sources of income for the period from 2007 to 2012 prompted by a report from members of a far right party (VMRO-BND party) who had been accused by the human rights group of inciting hatred and xenophobia. The audit did not find any violation of legislation and financial regulations.

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