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Moldova: Failure to uphold freedom of expression

Police in the capital, Chisinau, were said to have taken no action yesterday as several participants in a peaceful demonstration -- including the Chair of Amnesty International's branch in Moldova, Igor Grosu -- were injured by masked attackers.

"The apparent failure by police to come to the aid of those being attacked, or to show interest in apprehending those responsible, is a further indication of the pressure on freedom of expression today in Moldova," said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

The demonstration was organized by Amnesty International Moldova, the Resource Centre for Human Rights (CReDO), Hyde Park, Promo Lex and the Institute for Human Rights to protest against previous failures by the police to uphold the right to freedom of expression, and to call on the Prosecutor General's office investigate these violations. Shortly after gathering in front of the Prosecutor General's office in central Chisinau the demonstrators were attacked by about 10 men, some wearing masks, who sprayed paint at them, and punched and hit them. Igor Grosu was hit from behind and had to be treated in hospital for a head injury requiring several stitches. A member of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights was punched in the face.

The demonstrators called the police immediately, but reported that no officers came to their aid -- even up to one hour after the events. By contrast when Anatol Matasaru staged a one-man peaceful legal protest outside the Prosecutor General's office on 29 January police arrived within minutes to detain him. After participants in yesterday's demonstration had successfully chased off the attackers the police again refused to come and collect evidence which remained of the attack, such as masks and spray paint cans.

Amnesty International has been increasingly concerned that despite a progressive new law on assembly which came into force in April 2008, police have continued to restrict freedom of expression by detaining peaceful protesters although most prosecutions brought by the police are not upheld by the courts. According to monitoring carried out by CReDO, police presence at demonstrations, the number of detentions and the use of force by police have all actually increased since the new law came into force.

Amnesty International is calling on the Prosecutor General of Moldova to investigate the reported failure of the police to protect the demonstrators or identify the perpetrators, as well as previous failures to allow demonstrations in accordance with the Law on Assembly.