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## **‘Virulent’ homophobic attacks put South Caucasus activists at risk**

Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan must do more to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people, Amnesty International said after a spate of attacks on activists.

Instead of condemning a firebomb attack on a gay-friendly bar in downtown Yerevan, Armenia’s capital, last week, some public officials went on the record making homophobic remarks and condoning violence against LGBTI people.

Meanwhile, on Thursday in neighbouring Georgia, police in the capital Tbilisi did little to prevent an Orthodox Christian group from obstructing a peaceful march by an LGBTI organization to mark the International Day against Homophobia.

“The virulent nature of these recent attacks shows the need for a public dialogue to tackle homophobia throughout the South Caucasus to protect LGBTI people from discrimination,” said John Dalhuisen, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

### **Yerevan firebomb**

On 8 May, self-described “fascists” were caught on tape by a security camera as they threw Molotov cocktails through the windows of a gay-friendly bar in downtown Yerevan.

Police reportedly arrived at the scene 12 hours later to investigate the arson attack.

Two young men were arrested as part of the investigation, but were bailed shortly afterwards by two opposition parliamentarians from the nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation - Dashnaktsutyun party (ARF), who condoned the attack, saying it was in line with "the context of societal and national ideology".

ARF leaders have distanced themselves from the bailout, saying that the parliamentarians acted in their personal capacity, but they have fallen short of publicly calling on their colleagues to apologize for supporting the alleged hate crime.

Eduard Sharmazanov, spokesperson for Armenia’s ruling Republican Party and Parliament Vice Speaker told Hayots Ashkharh newspaper Thursday that, “As an Armenian citizen and member of [the ruling] national-conservative party, I find the rebellion of the two young Armenian people against the homosexuals ... completely right and justified... Those human rights defenders, who are trying to earn cheap dividends from this incident, I urge them first and foremost to protect the national and universal values.”

Amnesty International believes this type of official discourse is dangerous, fuels discrimination and undermines the role of human rights defenders.

“The official response to the firebombing in Yerevan is utterly shocking – protecting the human rights of LGBTI people is not a concession, but an obligation under international law that Armenia is a party to,” said Dalhuisen.

### **Homophobia and Transphobia in Tbilisi**

On Thursday, a peaceful march in central Tbilisi marking the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia came under attack when a group of Orthodox Christians and members of the “Orthodox Parents’ Union” began insulting and threatening protesters from IDENTOBA, a Georgian LGBTI rights organization.

Orthodox priests were among the counter-demonstrators, who prevented the marchers from continuing to the Georgian Parliament, shouting abuse and throwing punches at the peaceful protesters. Fighting reportedly broke out as the counter-demonstrators attacked marchers, tearing up placards.

A video of the incident shows police intervening once a scuffle broke out between the two groups. Five people were detained – including three of the IDENTOBA protesters – and were released shortly afterwards.

“A hallmark of a tolerant society is allowing peaceful protests to proceed and stopping discrimination in its tracks,” said Dalhuisen.

Public authorities must respect the freedom of expression of all groups without discrimination. This extends to protecting peaceful demonstrators from violent attacks.

“Police in Tbilisi failed to prevent homophobic and transphobic violence from marring the International Day against Homophobia march – they must now investigate what went wrong and implement measures to improve their policing of peaceful demonstrations in future,” Dalhuisen added.

### **Concerns in Baku ahead of Eurovision**

LGBTI groups in the neighbouring South Caucasus country of Azerbaijan have also raised concerns about the safety of LGBTI participants during the upcoming Eurovision song contest, which will take place in the capital Baku from 22-26 May.

Azerbaijan decriminalized same sex relations in 2001, but has so far failed to enact laws that specifically ban discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and provide effective protection to LGBTI people. Homophobia and transphobia remain rife and little progress has been made to change public attitudes and the discriminatory practices against LGBTI people.