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Macedonia: Guarantee the right to freedom of peaceful assembly

Amnesty International today welcomed the commitment by the Macedonian authorities to ensure that the International Day for Tolerance march in Skopje goes ahead on 16 November without hindrance.

The organisation also urged the Macedonian authorities to properly protect participants in the march from any threats or violence.

“The rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are guaranteed in law and it is essential that Macedonian authorities uphold these rights,” said Sian Jones, Amnesty International’s Balkans expert.

The organizers of the march are appealing for tolerance and non-discrimination on basis of gender, ethnic or racial background, religion or belief, disability, age, and sexual orientation or any other ground.

Earlier this year, participants in a peaceful student demonstration were physically attacked and racist, homophobic and other discriminatory and abusive insults were hurled at them by a large “spontaneous” counter-demonstration.

“Civil society activists must be allowed to voice peacefully their concerns and act against discrimination of any kind, and to stand up in defence of human rights and freedoms,” said Sian Jones.

The Tolerance march on 16 November is one of a number of activities being organized by a coalition of non-governmental organizations, including Civil, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in the Republic of Macedonia, and the Center for Freedom, to celebrate the UN International Day of Tolerance.

The coalition is encouraging citizens and civil society organizations to organize similar events in other parts of the country.

The coalition will urge the government to adopt a draft Law on the Prevention and Protection from Discrimination. The adoption of a law on non-discrimination is part of the process of legislative reform demanded by the European Union (EU) accession process.

In their November Progress Report, the European Commission highlighted continued discrimination in Macedonia against minorities, including on the basis of sex, ethnic origin (in particular Roma), disability and sexual orientation.

Background

Amnesty International notes that the draft Law on the Prevention and Protection from Discrimination, as seen in October 2009, was not yet compatible with EU legislation, nor did it provide against discrimination by

both public and private actors.

Further, the law failed to make provision for independent institutions to ensure the promotion, prevention and protection of rights, or the means to ensure that a person suffering discrimination would have access to an effective remedy.

In April 2009 a demonstration by a group of 150 people (predominantly students from the Faculty of Architecture), against the proposed building of a church in the main square in Skopje, was attacked by a “spontaneous” demonstration of an estimated 3-4,000 people.

The student protestors claim that the police on that occasion were unable to protect them from attack.

However, several students are currently being prosecuted on charges of failing to maintain public order.

The failure of the authorities to guarantee freedom of expression and peaceful assembly was criticized by EU representatives and other members of the international community in Skopje, and the subject of a parliamentary inquiry.