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Opposition Marks International Human Rights Day With Protests And Vigils 'Repentant' Oppositionists Pardon By Sarkisian



Opposition protesters marching in Yerevan

YEREVAN -- On December 10, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of UN Human Rights International Convention, members of the Armenian National Congress and opposition supporters visited Victory Park in Yerevan and laid flowers to the memorial of the repressed. Then those gathered went to the monument of Alexander Miasnikian, where they lit candles and laid flowers in the memory of the citizens killed during the March 1 events.

The next stop for the demonstration was in nearby Sakharov Square where the wives and daughters of "political prisoners" were on a sitting strike.

Melissa Brown, the American wife of Alexander Arzumanyan, the Ter-Petrosyan election campaign manager who is currently in pretrial detention on a coup charge, said the venue was chosen for a reason.

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Mediators Renew Calls For Karabakh Peace Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Claims Settlement Proposals 'Altered'

HELSINKI -- The United States, Russia and France urged Armenia and Azerbaijan last week to build on reported progress in recent talks between their president and reach a framework agreement on Nagorno-Karabakh in the "coming months."

High-ranking diplomats from the three nations jointly spearheading the drawn-out peace process reaffirmed the basic principles of a Karabakh settlement that were formally submitted to the conflicting parties in Madrid last year.

"We call on the parties to work with the Co-Chairs [of the OSCE Minsk Group] to finalize the Basic Principles in coming months, and then begin drafting a comprehensive peace settlement as outlined by those agreed principles," Foreign Ministers Sergei Lavrov of Russia and Bernard Kouchner of France and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried said in a joint declaration.

The declaration was issued after the three men met with the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers on the sidelines of an OSCE ministerial meeting in Helsinki.

The Helsinki statement called on the conflicting parties to bolster the ceasefire regime along the Line of Contact east of Karabakh and the Armenian-Azerbaijani frontier by pulling back snip-



OSCE mediators with foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan during Helsinki declaration

ers from their frontline positions. "We reiterate our firm view that there is no military solution to the conflict and call on the parties to recommit to a peaceful resolution," it said.

According to Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov the three co-chairs have made changes in their proposed basic principles of a settlement in hopes of facilitating their acceptance by Armenia and Azerbaijan, said on Friday.

"In order to achieve a new phase of the settlement, the foreign ministers of the countries co-chairing the OSCE's Minsk Group have presented the parties to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with certain changes in the Madrid proposals," Mammadyarov said, according to the Day.az news service. He did not specify those changes.

Armenia Remembers Devastating 1988 Earthquake President Bush Sends a Letter of Sympathy

GYUMRI -- Armenia marked on Sunday the 20th anniversary of a catastrophic earthquake that killed about 25,000 people and devastated much of its two northern regions that have still not been completely rebuilt.

Ceremonies were held in Gyumri, the country's second largest city hit hard by the disaster, which were attended by current and former government officials and construction and rescue workers from across the former Soviet Union who had helped Armenia cope with its devastating consequences.

Armenians also received messages of sympathy from the presidents of Russia and the United States on the occasion. "On this solemn anniversary we are reminded of the strong bonds between America and Armenia and the resilience of the Armenian people," President George W. Bush said in his written address. "They rose from this tragedy and have reclaimed a bright future of hope and opportunity."

Nikolay Ryzhkov, a former Soviet prime minister who personally coordinated the rescue and reconstruction efforts, delivered a speech, reading out a message from Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. "We bow our heads before the memory of the thousands of victims of this natural disaster," Medvedev said. "We remember with deep respect and gratitude today

the courage of the rescuers who answered the call for help."

That help was badly needed by as many as 500,000 people whose homes, built in apparent violation of seismic safety standards, were destroyed by two powerful tremors that rocked much of Armenia's territory 20 years ago. The Ryzhkov-led Soviet government pledged to rebuild them in two years. Dozens of construction companies from across the Soviet Union were assigned to the earthquake zone in the following months.

However, the massive reconstruction effort fizzled out with the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. Independent Armenia's successive governments were too cash-strapped to complete it. The reconstruction gained fresh momentum in the early 2000s when thousands of new houses and apartments were built in the economically depressed area with the financial assistance of U.S.-Armenian billionaire Kirk Kerkorian. Nonetheless, as many as 7,000 families in the quake-hit Shirak and Lori regions still lack permanent housing, huddling in metal and wooden shacks devoid of basic amenities.

"We still live in a shack, and there are no jobs here," one elderly woman told RFE/RL as she stood outside the

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Turkish Intellectuals Apologize for Armenian 'Great Disaster' Armenian Intellectuals Appeal to Gul for Genocide Recognition

ANKARA/YEREVAN -- In an unprecedented gesture, a group of Turkish intellectuals have publicly apologized for what they called a "great disaster" that befell the Ottoman Empire's Armenian minority and urged their compatriots to follow suit.

"I cannot conscientiously accept the indifference to the great disaster that Ottoman Armenians suffered in 1915, and its denial. I reject this injustice and acting of my own will, I share the feelings and pains of my Armenian brothers and sisters, and I apologize to them," reads a petition signed by them and published by the "Zaman" daily on Friday.

The newspaper said the signatories will ask other intellectuals and ordinary Turks alike to sign the petition. "We are searching for human beings," one of them, scholar Baskin Oran, was quoted as saying. "We thought about urging the state to apologize but we decided to let individuals act according to their conscience. This call is for everybody."

According to "Zaman," some Turkish civil society representatives

were quick to object to the campaign. "For me, all these events [of 1915] were the fault of Turkish nationalism flourishing at that time, and personally I don't identify with it," historian Ayse Hur told the paper. "So I do not feel the need to apologize personally."

Another intellectual, Aytekin Yildiz, pointed to the signatories' failure to describe as "genocide" the deaths of an estimated 1.5 million Armenians during the final years of the Ottoman Empire. "What do they mean by 'great disaster'?" he said. "Let's face it, it was genocide."

The official Turkish state policy of vehemently denying the genocide is increasingly questioned by independent Turkish scholars and other intellectuals, even if few of them publicly use the word genocide in reference to the mass killings and deportations. Dozens of them gathered at a private Istanbul university in 2005 for a landmark conference that sparked angry protests from Turkish nationalist groups.

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Armenia: Dim Outlook for Media Freedom, Reporters Say

By Marianna Grigoryan
EurasiaNet

Despite heavy government emphasis on the importance of freedom of speech, the violence against Armenian journalists is continuing. Civil society leaders and reporters contend that officials' sluggish response masks either rank incompetence or an intention to keep the lid on government criticism. Government officials reject the charges as groundless.

The most recent encroachment upon media rights came in mid-November when Edik Baghdasarian, one of the country's best-known investigative journalists, was ambushed and badly beaten by two unknown men in Yerevan. The attack was the seventh reported case of violence against a journalist in Armenia this year.

"I am convinced that the attack was connected with my professional activity," said Baghdasarian, who has conducted attention-grabbing investigations into government corruption, the mining industry, and human trafficking for the online newsmagazine Hetq.am, which he heads, and other publications. "I am myself looking into this case now and I hope the case will be solved."

"It is not so difficult to disclose these cases of violence and find those responsible," continued Baghdasarian, who sustained cranial-brain injuries in the November 17 attack. "But, of course, willpower is needed for that."

The government has assured Armenian media that all steps are being taken to solve the Baghdasarian case. "Every act of violence against a journalist is condemnable," Samvel Farmanian, spokesman for President Serzh Sarkisian, commented to EurasiaNet.

Armenian Prime Minister Tigran Sarkisian, who visited Baghdasarian in the hospital, has taken a similar tact, telling reporters that "a dialogue with media is necessary to specify the rules of the game." Sarkisian did not specify other participants in such a dialogue. "The environment should be such that there is a reciprocally respectful attitude," public television reported him as saying.

Some Armenian reporters believe that Baghdasarian's prominence motivates much of the government's display of interest in his case. In September, the 46-year-old journalist was the runner-up for the prestigious Global Shining Light Award, a prize given to the world's best investigative journalists.

The government's assurances have so far done little to convince other Armenian reporters.

One political reporter for the opposition Haykakan Zhamanak daily contended that the authorities do nothing to investigate reported attacks against journalists.

"The prime minister's visit to Edik Baghdasarian in the hospital was a mere publicity stunt," charged Lusine Barseghian, who is known for her critical stories about the government and government-linked clans. "If the authorities are interested in exposing anyone, they would have done so. Meanwhile, in many cases they are the ones who order it."



Edik Baghdasarian injured after a mid-November assault

Rafik Petrosian, a senior member of the governing Republican Party's parliamentary faction, countered that no one "praises" law-enforcement agencies for their "perfect work".

"There are unsolved murders. We condemn violence against journalists. However, the authorities are taking steps towards resolving these cases. It looks like Edik Baghdasarian's case is close to completion," Petrosian, who heads parliament's standing committee for state and legal affairs, told EurasiaNet.

He did not elaborate about the status of the Baghdasarian investigation. Police announced on November 26 that one man had turned himself in and admitted that he took part in the attack on Baghdasarian, yet allegedly declined to give further testimony.

But investigations into attacks on journalists do not necessarily come flush with results, noted Haykakan Zhamanak reporter Barseghian. On February 19, the day of the presidential vote, Barseghian herself was beaten at one Yerevan polling station while highlighting suspected fraud in favor of then Prime Minister Serzh Sarkisian, the government's favored candidate. A second attack came on August 11, when two unknown men attacked Barseghian from behind outside her apartment building.

"I definitely link what happened to me with my professional activities and there are concrete people and forces behind those who ordered the violence," Barseghian said. "Criminal cases were started in both cases. However, no results have come so far. If our country were a law-abiding state, the cases would have been solved a long time ago."

Republican Party parliamentarian Petrosian scoffed at the allegation. "Is there any evidence that the authorities or any government official were behind the attack? I can't accept a journalist making serious accusations without any evidence. Had there been any verdict finding any government-linked person at fault, then they can confidently make such statements," affirmed Petrosian.

One human rights activist argues that the lack of visible punishment for such incidents only encourages additional attacks.

"If there has been practically no punishment, then two conclusions can

Implications of the World's Financial Crisis for Armenia's Economy

Report By Policy Forum Armenia



particularly for critical commodities.

Monetary and Exchange Rate Policy Response

- Allow for much greater flexibility of the exchange rate by reducing to a minimum the Central Bank's interventions (i.e., sales of foreign exchange) on the foreign currency market.
- Gradually reduce policy interest rate and reserve requirements, and ease access to the Central Bank's credit and liquidity facilities, while carefully monitoring inflation developments. Prepare to adopt higher rates of credit expansion specifically targeting producers, especially exporters.

Structural Policy Response

- Create a lending facility for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to provide targeted and easy-to-access loans to viable SMEs in need of emergency financing.

- Take measures to reduce the monopoly price-setting powers of key import companies.

- Undertake a review of barriers for business operations and make credible steps to eliminate some of those barriers in the near term.

- Enhance/expand the social safety net by: (1) undertaking a review of the poverty guidelines, and (2) targeting the next layer (i.e., currently on the margin) of socially vulnerable strata of population, and (3) making credible steps toward eliminating corruption from the existing system.

- Review and enhance existing unemployment insurance and provide assistance to employees that have lost jobs due to crisis-related closures and downsizings.

To access the Report in full please visit www.pf-armenia.org.

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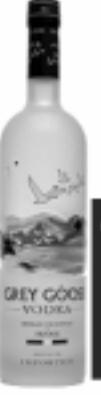
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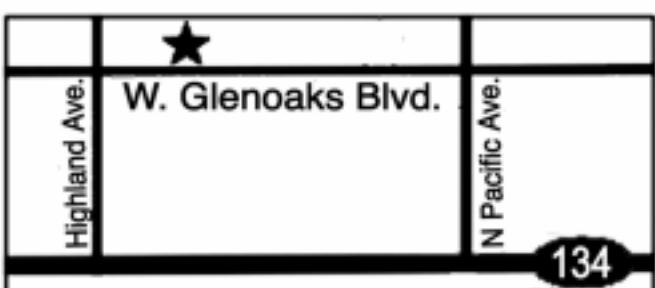


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