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The New Facts of Violation of Armenian Minority Rights by the Georgian Authorities

To All International Organizations, Embassies and Human Rights Structures Operating in Georgia

Despite international obligations assumed by the Georgian government for the protection of the rights of ethnic minorities in Georgia, despite numerous recommendations and appeals by international organizations, including the UN Human rights commission and human rights NGO-s to respect these obligations, the Georgian authorities continue to ignore and disregard issues of concern to the Armenian minority, contributing moreover, by a number of new steps, to the aggravation of tensions and the increase of discontent.

Within this context, the Georgian authorities have not only continued to disregard repeated demands by the Georgian Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church asking to be handed over Armenian churches of Georgia and particularly the Norashen church in Tbilisi, confiscated in the soviet era, but have also tacitly encouraged and sometimes even actively helped hostile actions on behalf of the Georgian clergy which is actively embarked for a certain time now in the process of self-appropriation of the Armenian churches in Georgia. In this line of action, the Georgian authorities recently provided once again construction permits to the clergy of the Georgian church neighboring Norashen, allowing it to build around Norashen a surrounding wall carrying Georgian religious ornaments, considerably complicating in this way the access to the Armenian church.

Due to protest actions of the Armenian community of Tbilisi and to appeals emanating from Armenian Apostolic Church authorities, several Armenian NGOs, including "Yerkir" Organization, it was possible to temporarily halt in May of the current year the hostile activities of Georgian priests, but construction works around the Armenian Norashen church resumed on a wide scale a few days ago (see attached photos).

In addition to this hostile policy towards the Armenian Apostolic Church in Georgia, while dealing with the Armenian minority in their country, Georgian authorities continue to violate basic international human rights' and democratic norms pertaining to this field. Thus, among other shortcomings within this context, they continue to maintain politically-motivated criminal charges against the political activists of the Armenian populated Javakheti region and their family members, lately arrested and imprisoned without real foundations.

Thus, Arthur Poghosyan, an activist of the political movement “Democratic Alliance “United Javakhk”, was recently sentenced to 2.5 years of imprisonment on the basis of fabricated charges. Another activist of the movement, Gurgen Shirinyan, has a search warrant issued against him by the authorities, while his father and aunt are detained and waiting trial. The leader of “United Javakhk”, Vahagn Chakahlyan, in turn, as well as his juvenile brother, are also in detention in Tbilisi, while their father, Rouben Chakhalyan, has been set free on bail.

Other issues which are a matter of concern for the Armenian minority still remain unresolved:

- the Armenian Apostolic Church continues to be deprived of a status of legal entity;
- the Armenian Minority in Georgia, particularly the part of it living compactly in the Javakheti region, continues to be under-represented in all spheres of public life;
- the Georgian central Government continues to enforce the laws obliging minorities to use exclusively the Georgian language in all fields of public activity, and particularly in the local administrations and local educational system within the context of regional self-government.
- posts in the local administration, educational sphere or any other post for the holders of professional diplomas continue to be contingent on the knowledge of the Georgian language.

Under the actual circumstances, while Georgia is still recovering with difficulty from the consequences of the recent armed conflict with Russia and is announcing the launching of a wave of democratization reforms and the enforcement of the rule of law, such a treatment by the Georgian authorities of its Armenian minority looks in fact much more irrational.

Taking into consideration the above mentioned facts, “Yerkir” Union calls upon the appropriate and specialized structures of the United Nations, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe, as well as of all other concerned international organizations and human rights bodies, to take immediate and direct measures to restrain Georgia’s negative current behavior against its Armenian minority, to put an end to the political persecutions in Javakheti, and to facilitate the emergence of a solution for the Armenian community of Georgia, as far as its minority rights are the issue, and in particular, to ensure this result by obtaining from the Georgian authorities to:

1. Set free all political prisoners recently detained in Javakheti and withdraw all politically motivated criminal charges against them;
2. Implement the rule of law and guarantee the security of the Armenian population of Javakheti;
3. Ensure the freedom of faith in the country and register the Armenian Apostolic Church as a legal entity in Georgia;
4. Return all confiscated places of worship to their legitimate owners;
5. Allow by law the use of the Armenian language in all spheres of public life in the local administrations of all regions where Armenians represent a majority.

The international community must act now to avoid further aggravation of the situation and prevent the emergence of a new seat of conflict.

Appendix. The construction of wall around Norashen church /18.10.2008/

