

**Amnesty International**

**Statement for Working Session 1: Fundamental Freedoms I**, including:

- Freedom of expression, free media and information

Amnesty International is concerned that many Participating States continue to fail to implement fully their commitments to protect the right to freedom of expression, free media and information.

In **Turkey** thousands of criminal prosecutions threaten the right to freedom of expression, unfair internet restrictions remain in place, and outspoken individuals continue to receive anonymous threats of violence. Criminal prosecutions brought under anti-terrorism legislation raise particular concerns given the routine use of extended pre-trial detention and the risk of lengthy prison sentences on conviction associated with such prosecutions. Evidence used in prosecutions brought under anti-terrorism legislation has included conduct protected by the right to freedom of expression including opinions expressed through newspaper articles and in speeches made during street demonstrations. Dissent relating to Kurdish rights and politics is particularly frequently prosecuted in addition to other criticism of the state and allegations of human rights abuses.

In **Azerbaijan**, government critics and opposition figures continue to be pursued on politically motivated, trumped up charges. There are still at least five people imprisoned for peacefully expressing their opinions following unfair trials, and a number of other government critics currently on trial. Journalists and human rights defenders are threatened, harassed, even beaten unconscious by state officials. Activists who took part in protests around the Eurovision contest in Baku in May this year have suffered persecution and harassment. Criminal charges were brought against the pro-democracy activist Mehman Huseynov in retaliation for his journalism and campaigning activities - notably meeting with the Swedish entrant and eventual winner of Eurovision, Loreen.

In **Georgia**, there has been an increase in the number of reports of intimidation and violence against the opposition supporters and pro-opposition journalists ahead of the upcoming Parliamentary elections. Since early March, a large number of opposition party members and suspected sympathisers have been summoned by the State Audit Service for questioning, which was carried out in an intimidating fashion with the apparent aim of influencing actual and potential opposition party sympathisers. Opposition parties and structures associated with them have also been selectively targeted for heavy fines and penalties, imposed as a result of unfair court hearings. Pro-opposition journalists have been assaulted while covering rallies and harassed and prevented from carrying out their journalistic work.

In **Tajikistan**, victims of torture, as well as journalists, lawyers and activists reporting on allegations of torture and other ill-treatment or abuses by government employees risked repercussions and faced harassment to prevent them from publicizing material perceived to criticize the authorities. Amnesty International received reports that in some cases ordinary members of the

public, who want to expose official wrongdoing or speak in support of official suspects, have been harassed, ill-treated and even threatened with criminal proceedings in order to prevent them from speaking out. For instance, Sharif Abdurahimzoda, Masoleh Soliev and Kosim Karimzoda from Khojai Alo village have been harassed, two of them had been ill-treated by police, threatened with criminal prosecution and two had to leave the country. Amnesty International is furthermore concerned that many detainees and their relatives refrain from publicizing and lodging complaints fearing further mistreatment or adverse effects on the criminal case contributing to a climate of impunity for official abuse.

In the **Russian Federation** a number of measures restricting the freedom of expression and association have been introduced in response to the wave of protest that accompanied the recent parliamentary and presidential elections. A Russian court's decision in August to find guilty members of the punk rock protest band Pussy Riot is a bitter blow for freedom of expression in the country. This trial is another example of the authorities' attempts to discourage and delegitimize dissent. Three members of the all-female group were charged with "hooliganism on grounds of religious hatred" after they sang a protest song in Moscow's main Orthodox cathedral in February. The judge sentenced them to two years imprisonment in a penal colony. They are appealing the decision.

***Recommendations:***

Amnesty International calls on the Participating States, to:

- Respect and protect the human rights of independent civil society activists and journalists, ensuring that they are able to carry out their peaceful activities free from harassment and without threat of detention and imprisonment and other human rights violations
- Refrain from passing – or, where already in place, abolish – any legislation, which exceeds the permissible restrictions on the right to freedom of expression under international law, and leaves the way open for the criminalization of a wide range of peacefully-expressed dissenting opinion.
- Release all prisoners of conscience jailed for expressing their political, religious or other conscientiously-held beliefs.