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September 11, 2013

Mr. Vladimir Gasparyan
Armenia Police Chief
Sent via email: press@police.am

HRW.org

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Mr. Vahram G. Shahinyan
Head of Special Investigative Service
Sent via email: press@investigatory.am

Subject: Attacks on protesters

Dear Mr. Gasparyan and Mr. Shahinyan,

I am writing to express profound concern about the growing number of physical attacks on civil activists and peaceful demonstrators who have been engaged in several protests in Yerevan in the past three weeks. Based on information Human Rights Watch gathered from interviews with five victims, we are concerned that the attacks appear to be a concerted effort to intimidate the protesters, prevent them from exercising their rights to freedom of assembly and expression, and send a chilling message to others. Human Rights Watch urges you to take all appropriate measures to promptly, thoroughly, and effectively investigate the attacks, identify and bring the perpetrators to justice, and make clear that such violence against peaceful demonstrators will be neither tolerated nor condoned.

In the attacks that Human Rights Watch documented, unidentified men in civilian clothes set upon individual demonstrators late at night after they left the protest venues. Victims of the attacks sustained multiple bruises, including light concussions, a broken nose, and broken bones. In all five cases, police took victims' reports and in one case police took the victim to the crime scene. Unfortunately, to the best of our knowledge, police have not taken further steps to identify and apprehend the assailants in these cases, even when one of the victims was able to identify those he suspected of being his attackers.

The five people whom Human Rights Watch interviewed had been involved in protests held in front of the city municipal building and the ruling Republican Party headquarters. They were attacked in three separate incidents. They are described below.

On September 5, 2013, about half a dozen unidentified assailants attacked Haykak Arshamyan and Suren Saghatelyan. Both men are well-known civil society activists. Arshamyan, 42, a project coordinator at the Yerevan Press Club, a media advocacy organization, and a board member of Transparency International's (TI) Anti-Corruption Center, also teaches human rights and

civic education at a local university. Saghatelian, 43, is also a board member of TI's Anti-Corruption Center and works at World Vision Armenia, a religious organization that distributes humanitarian assistance. Both men participated in several peaceful protests that followed President Sargsyan's September 3 announcement that Armenia would join the Russia-led customs union.

Arshamyan told Human Rights Watch that he spent about an hour at a peaceful rally in front of the ruling Republican Party headquarters on September 5, left around 9 p.m., met with Saghatelian in the center, and drove home with Saghatelian, as they live in the same neighborhood. About five unidentified men attacked them as Arshamyan was trying to open the garage door in his courtyard. He told Human Rights Watch,

Several men attacked me from behind and without any warning started to beat me, particularly aiming to hit me on the face and head. It was very dark and I could not see their faces. I fell on the ground, and they continued to kick me; I tried to stand up, but they kicked and I fell again. They did not say anything, not even cursing, just beating without saying a word. I shouted and tried to understand why they were beating me, but nothing.

Saghatelian told Human Rights Watch that he was attacked as he tried to leave the car and help Arshamyan. He explained,

I noticed guys running towards Haykak and attacking him. I tried to get out of the car, but could not, as three men started to beat me too. They hit me with the car door as I tried to leave, and broke my nose and a finger, my head was also cut. They said nothing, but kicked and beat me and left without saying a word.

After the assailants left, Arshamyan and Saghatelian called the police and an ambulance. Saghatelian was hospitalized for several days, and Arshamyan was discharged from the hospital the same night. Arshamyan sustained multiple bruises to his face, knees, and shoulders, and the right side of his face was swollen and he required several stitches for a cut on his cheek. Saghatelian's nose was broken and required emergency surgery, and he sustained a cut to his head between four and five centimeters long, which required stitches. The ring-finger on his left hand was also broken.

Police took statements from both men that night, but as of this writing they have not informed Arshamyan or Saghatelian of any further investigatory steps.

On the night of September 4, unidentified assailants attacked Arman Alexanyan, a 21-year-old information technology student at Yerevan State University. Alexanyan is also a civic activist and participated in a sit-in in front of the Yerevan municipal building. Several dozen activists have been engaged in a round-the-clock protest in front of the city municipality, demanding the sacking of the head of the transport department in the Yerevan municipality and the director of a municipal bus operator. The protests started in late July after a temporary price hike for municipal transportation.

On the evening of September 4, as he was returning home around midnight from the protest venue, about 10 young men in civilian clothes attacked him. They punched him several times

on his head and kicked his feet, asking him why he was involved in the protests. As a result, Alexanyan sustained several lumps on his head. He managed to escape and ran back to the protest site. His friends called an ambulance and he was hospitalized briefly.

Police visited Alexanyan in the hospital and took a statement from him. On September 6, police asked him to come to the scene of the incident for investigation purposes. As Alexanyan was telling the officers the details of the attack, he noticed three individuals across the street, who he believed were part of the group of assailants. He immediately told police about it, but according to him, the police took no further steps then and there to investigate whether these were the alleged perpetrators. According to Alexanyan, police have not informed him of any further investigative steps, for example a police lineup of suspects.

Early on the morning of August 25, about six unidentified assailants attacked Babken Der Grigoryan and Mihran Margaryan in the city center as they were returning from the sit-in protest in front of the municipality. Grigoryan and Margaryan are both youth activists involved in various youth initiatives against government corruption and human rights violations. Both men were regular participants in the protests in front of the municipal building. On August 24, over a dozen activists, including Grigoryan and Margaryan, sat on the stairs of the municipality as part of their protest. Around 7 p.m., police demanded they leave. According to Grigoryan, the protesters told the police that if they explain the law they were violating, they would leave. In response, police detained about 16 activists and held them in the central police station for about three hours before releasing them.

After they were released, Grigoryan and Margaryan went back to the municipal building and rejoined the protest. Shortly after 1 a.m. they left the protest site and as they were walking away on a nearby street, they were attacked. Grigoryan told Human Rights Watch,

As we were walking down on Grikor Lusarovich Street, a group of three or four guys approached us and asked if we were coming from the protest. We said no and continued to walk. On another crossroad, another group of guys asked us the same question. By then, both groups of young, athletic-looking guys circled us, saying “we know you are coming from the protests” and started punching us. My friend was punched in the face and his nose started bleeding. They punched me in the chest and body and I fell on the ground as they continued to kick me. My iPhone and a residence permit fell out of my pockets and they took them, saying, “We know where you live and can come after you.”

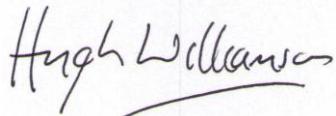
The assailants ran away when some bypassing cars started to stop at the site of the fight. Grigoryan and Margaryan sustained multiple bruises to their bodies. Margaryan corroborated the story when interviewed separately by Human Rights Watch.

The activists’ friends called the police, who took them to a police station to file an assault report. More than two weeks after the incident, police have not yet contacted them for additional investigative measures and to the best of their knowledge, a criminal case has not been launched regarding the attack.

We urge you to take immediate steps to conduct comprehensive investigations into all allegations of attacks against peaceful demonstrators. Such investigations should be conclusive, public, involve the participation of the victims, and be capable of leading to the identification and prosecution of the perpetrators. Accountability for these assaults is essential to demonstrate the government's commitment to justice and to prevent any attempts to attack freedom of assembly. Finding and prosecuting the perpetrators would demonstrate that the authorities are not condoning or tolerating such violence.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter and we look forward to continued engagement with the Armenian government.

Sincerely,



Hugh Williamson
Director
Europe and Central Asia division
Human Rights Watch