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Հայրենադարձության եւ հիմնավորման հասարակական կազմակերպությունների միություն  
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## Press-release

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### **“Yerkir” Union’s Appeal to International Community With Respect to the Recent Events in Akhalkalaki**

On July 17, 2008 a blast took place in the town of Akhalkalaki, regional center of the Akhalkalaki district of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia, near the house of the Chief of Police Samvel Petrosyan. There were no casualties.

Immediately after the blast, the local police forces initiated an unprecedented wave of arrests within the ranks of the activists of the “United Javakhk Democratic Alliance” the local political movement. Thus, up to 15 activists were brutally arrested, some were fiercely beaten. The police also entered the building of the Youth radio station which belonged to the same political movement. For this purpose, the entrance door was crushed and internal doors and windows were damaged. No arms were found however on the premises.

On July 17, around 8:00 p.m., some 40 persons regrouping both police forces and civilians, stormed into the house of the local activist, Gurgen Shirinyan. During this operation, Gurgen’s father was fiercely beaten and one local policeman, Arthur Berudjanyan, was shot dead. Police sources declared that Gurgen Shirinyan fled, while his father and aunt were arrested.

On July 18, “United Javakhk Democratic Alliance” issued a statement describing both the blast and the incidents that followed as provocations aiming the destruction of their organization. The statement required from the authorities the holding of an impartial investigation.

In the afternoon Of July 20, another policeman - Armen Gabrielyan was shot dead. According to a declaration on behalf of the authorities, the dead policeman had... committed suicide.

At 4:00 am on July 21, armed and masked Georgian special forces intruded the house of the “United Javakhk Democratic Alliance” political movements’ leader, Vahagn Chakhalyan, and arrested all the members of his family. At 5:00 am, Vahagn Chakhalyan’s mother was set free, but he, his father and his adolescent brother were detained in Akhaltsikhe, the center of the province. Later on they were taken to Tbilisi, where they continue to remain in custody up to now. Chakhalyan’s, his father’s and brother’s preliminary detention was immediately extended to two months.

Parallel to these events, the police stormed once again the building of the Youth radio station, but this time... arms and ammunition were “found” and confiscated.

Currently, authorities keep under arrest Gurgen Shirinyan's father (Harutyun Shirinyan), Gurgen Shirinyan's aunt (Karine Shirinyan), as well as Vahagn Chakhalyan, Vahagn Chakhalyan's father (Rouben Chakhalyan) and Vahagn Chakhalyan's brother (Armen Chakhalyan). The building of the "Youth Radio" is closed and sealed, all computers and other furniture are confiscated.

On July 23, "Yerkir" Union of NGOs for Repatriation and Settlement, in collaboration with its Georgian chapter "Yerkir-Georgia", has sent a fact finding mission to Akhalkalaki; including a cameraman, a lawyer and members of the UNGO. The delegation interviewed relatives and neighbors of the detained persons, as well as policemen. The Main places where the incidents occurred were also visited and filmed.

The following facts were noted:

1. All arrests were conducted with flagrant violations. None of the arrested persons was informed of his legal rights, his legal status, or of his possibilities for self- protection.
2. Many of the arrested were beaten both at the time of the arrest and during the detention period.
3. Detained persons were interrogated, (some, for several hours) however written reports on the interrogations were not kept.
4. During the search of Gurgun Shirinyan's house, the police has discovered ammunition, however no external witnesses were present to verify and register the facts.
5. An official search warrant was not presented to the father of Gurgun Shirinyan.
6. The police officers used degrading treatment toward Gurgun Shirinyan's relatives, and in particular, Gurgun Shirinyan's father was slapped and then brutally beaten.
7. Under the pretext that an investigation has to ascertain as to whom the discovered ammunitions belong, Gurgun Shirinyan's father and aunt were arrested and detained without any warrant.
8. During Chakhalyan's house search, arms and ammunitions were "found" and caused the arrest of Chakhalyan and his relatives. However no external witnesses participated to the search or noted the results of the search.
9. Neither Vahagn Chakhalyan, nor any of the members of his family were shown a search warrant.
10. The arrest of the members of Chakhalyan's family was accompanied with violence, Rouben, Vahagn and Armen Chakhalyan were beaten and threatened.
11. Chakhalyan's mother (Gayane Chakhalyan) was also arrested. She was questioned for more than a hour, but no written record was kept of her interrogation. She was threatened and freed without any explanation.
12. Armen Chakhalyan, who is a minor, was interrogated without the presence of his parents or of any impartial adult.
13. In addition to the above mentioned persons who continue to still remain in police custody, numerous other persons were arrested and interrogated, they were all threatened, many were beaten, but all were released without any explanation and with no written record of the on-going interrogations which concerned them personally.

The "United Javakhk" Democratic Alliance" political movement participated in the local elections in October 2006, in which they got about 30% of the Akhalkalaki district votes and took 3 seats in Akhalkalaki sakreboulo (local self-governing body). Yet, the movement rejected the election results as far as it was concerned, dubbing those results as a flagrant fraud. The leaders of this political movement, and especially Chakhalyan, struggles for a long time now for the fulfillment of the Armenian minority rights. Based on this fact, "Yerkir" Union strongly believes that Chakhalyan's arrest and subsequent detention were purely motivated by political reasons.

"Yerkir" Union considers the recent incidents in Akhalkalaki to be the Georgian government's unwillingness to solve minority issues, preferring instead to resort to brutal force to suppress expressions of legitimate complaint.

"Yerkir" Union therefore calls upon the Georgian government:

- to guarantee a fair and unbiased investigation of the recent incidents in Akhalkalaki,
- to immediately release from detention all relatives of Vahagn Chakhalyan and Gurgen Shirinyan,
- to immediately investigate all human rights' abuses which took place during the recent incidents in Akhalkalaki, and in particular, the human rights' abuses which occurred during the arrests, the interrogations and the detentions,
- to hold a fair and impartial investigation of the assassination of the two ethnic Armenian policemen,
- to guarantee Vahagn Chakhalyan's rights for a fair and impartial trial.

"Yerkir" Union also calls upon foreign missions in Georgia, international organizations and institutions, international and local human rights organizations and Georgia's human rights public defender, Mr. Subari

- to recognize Vahagn Chakhalyan and all his detained relatives, as well as Gurgen Shirinyan's detained relatives as political prisoners
- to take appropriate steps for monitoring the conditions of detention of all the political prisoners, to secure their right not to be subjected to torture and ill-treatment any more, and to assure their right to be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.

"Yerkir" Union urges the Georgian mass-media to respect the right of the Georgian and international communities to be informed and to break the information blockade around this case by providing objective and full-length coverage.

"Yerkir" Union also expresses its concern about the alarming socio-political and psychological impact which will have the recent incidents on the Armenian minority of Javakheti. We call upon the Georgian government, as well as upon the international and local organizations and institutions to take appropriate and efficient steps for eliminating the possible negative impacts of these recent critical developments.