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## U.S. Department of State

### Armenia Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, January 30, 1997.

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#### ARMENIA

Armenia has a constitutional government in which the President has extensive powers and the role of the legislature relative to the executive branch is severely circumscribed. The President appoints the Prime Minister, who is now in charge of the Cabinet. President Levon Ter-Petrossian was reelected in a controversial multicandidate election in September, which was flawed by numerous irregularities and serious breaches of the election law. The opposition rejected the official election results and asked the Constitutional Court to invalidate the Central Election Commission (CEC) decision on the results and to order a new election. The Court's handling of the case did not assuage doubts about the credibility of the official election results. A transitional National Assembly in which ruling party loyalists hold about 88 percent of the seats was elected in July 1995; local and international observers characterized the 1995 elections as "generally free, but not fair." Elections for a new National Assembly are scheduled for 1999. The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary; however, in practice judges are subject to political pressure from both the executive and legislature.

In October the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of National Security combined to form the Ministry of Internal Affairs and National Security which is responsible for domestic security, intelligence activities, border control, and supervises the national police force. The Ministry of Defense assists in domestic security during serious internal disorders. Some of the security forces committed serious human rights abuses.

Economic reforms continued to move forward in the face of many obstacles: The collapse of external trade links and sources of raw material that followed the Soviet Union's demise; the lingering effects of

the massive 1988 earthquake; and the threat of a renewed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Despite these problems, gross domestic product (GDP) increased by 6 percent in 1996. Per capita annual GDP rose by about 14 percent to \$533. Inflation remained low, and the currency was stable. The Government passed a property law and is currently in the process of issuing titles to real estate owners.

The Government's human rights record remained uneven, improving incrementally in some areas, while serious problems remained in others. Its manipulation of the September presidential election continued to restrict citizens' ability to change their government. Although the Government passed an improved election law and selected new members of the CEC, including a new chairman, international observers reported that serious breaches of the election law and numerous irregularities resulted in a lack of confidence in the integrity of the overall election process. International observers urged that the Government implement recommendations of international experts to address the flaws and rebuild public confidence in the electoral process. Members of the security forces beat detainees during arrest and interrogation and also beat passersby in areas adjoining demonstrations. These violations of the law by internal security personnel, notably the sixth directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Yerevan, continued in a climate of impunity from government sanction. Security forces continued to arbitrarily arrest and detain citizens. During the government crackdown following a violent demonstration after the presidential election, authorities beat and detained members of the opposition and demonstrators.

The Government signed an agreement with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) giving general and private access to detainees; however, the Government's cooperation in implementing the agreement was uneven. Security forces also infringed on citizens' privacy rights. The judiciary is subject to political pressure; however, in one notable case a court reversed the illegal actions of government officials; a district court judge overturned the decision of the Minister of Justice to dismiss the leadership and transfer ownership of a prominent independent newspaper. The Government continued to place some restrictions on freedom of the press; security forces beat and detained journalists after the September election, and journalists practice some self-censorship. Although reduced from previous years, credible reports of harassment and intimidation of journalists and editors continued. The number of local independent television and radio stations grew and, together with the press, were increasingly vocal and critical. However, the Government continued to dominate nationwide television and radio broadcasting. The Government imposed some limits on freedom of assembly and association especially during the post-election crackdown. A previously suspended prominent political party, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF/Dashnaks), was not reinstated, although the authorities tolerated its gatherings, news conferences and activities, and the Prime Minister initiated meetings with its representatives. The National Democratic Union's (NDU) party office in Yerevan was closed for about 2 months following the postelection violence and not reopened until after the Constitutional Court ruling on the NDU's election grievances. The Government retains some limits on freedom of religion. Discrimination against women and minorities is a problem.

## **RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**

### **Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:**

#### **a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killings**

There were no reported cases of political or extrajudicial killings.

#### **b. Disappearance**

There were no reported cases of political disappearance.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The Constitution and the law prohibit torture. However, the practice of security personnel beating detainees during arrest and interrogation continued. For example, Aramazd Zakaryan, an opposition National Assembly deputy with immunity, was beaten badly and detained for 2 days before being released to a hospital with broken ribs and a concussion. There were credible reports of threats to detainees' family members. In the first days of the postpresidential election crackdown, while a ban on meetings w