

## Reporters Without Borders Finds Decreased Press Freedom In Armenia

PARIS -- Press freedom in Armenia has decreased markedly over the past year, an international media rights group said on Wednesday, pointing to a temporary ban on independent news reporting imposed by the Armenian government in March.

The Paris-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF) put Armenia in 102nd place in its latest World Press Freedom Index covering 173 nations. Armenia ranked 77th in the previous RSF survey released a year ago.

RSF attributed the drop to a three-week state of emergency which was introduced in Yerevan following the March 1 deadly clashes between security forces and opposition supporters demanding a re-run of the February 19 presidential election. As part of that measure, all media outlets were ordered to cite only government sources in their news reporting.

The draconian restriction was enforced by government censors. As a result, most of the local independent and pro-opposition newspapers suspended their publication during the emergency rule.

Most of the Armenian media experts interviewed by RFE/RL agreed with RSF's conclusions. "Regress [in media freedom] in Armenia in 2008 is obvious, and that is mainly the result of the unprecedented March censorship," said Mesrop Harutiunian of the Yerevan

Press Club. "We still feel consequences of that censorship."

Harutiunian also pointed to a government crackdown on an independent TV station in Armenia's second largest city of Gyumri and the recent passage of legal amendments that prolonged an effective government ban on another, more famous broadcaster that was pulled off the air in 2002.

"That the situation in Armenia has deteriorated this year is a fact," said Aleksandr Iskandarian, director of the Yerevan-based Caucasus Media Institute. "I would just note that there has been some positive change in the second half of the year."

RSF's findings were also endorsed by Aram Abrahamian, editor-in-chief of the independent daily "Aravot." "That is an absolutely realistic and objective evaluation," he said.

RSF found an even sharper deterioration of the situation with media freedom in neighboring Georgia which the United States and the European Union regard as the most democratic and liberal of the three South Caucasus states. Georgia, which went through a state of emergency in November 2007 and a brief war with Russia last August, slipped 54 places to 120th in the survey.

Azerbaijan fared even worse, falling from 139th to 150th spot in the rankings.

## Armenian Opposition Suspends Protests

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the event of a military threat to Nagorno-Karabakh I would call upon the popular movement activists and supporters to suspend their activities and dedicate themselves to the cause of all-national struggle," Ter-Petrosyan reminded. "As the imminent solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with its implied dangers is tantamount to a military threat, I think it is time for this call to be made."

Stating that the current circumstances require a serious approach from all political forces of Armenia, the opposition leader said that with its "bold and responsible step" to halt mass events temporarily, the popular movement proves its "seriousness."

Ter-Petrosyan at the same time charged that Sarkisian is now ready to go as far as to "put Karabakh up for sale" and renounce Armenia's political and military alliance with Russia in an effort to legitimize his rule in the eyes of the international community. "In return for this, the West is ready to turn a blind eye to Serzh Sarkisian's vices; forget the disgraceful elections of February 19 and the March 1 crime; ignore his dictatorial internal policy;

tolerate restrictions on democratic freedoms and widespread human rights abuses; and come to terms with the existence of political prisoners," he said, repeatedly condemning the Western stance as "immoral."

"By turning his back on Russia and fully relying on the West and the United States of Armenia and its ally Turkey in particular, Serzh Sarkisian is effectively entrusting the latter with the pivotal issue in Armenia's foreign policy: a unilateral settlement of the Karabakh conflict," Ter-Petrosyan claimed. "Such a conclusion stems from the fact that the West is clearly trying to drive Russia out of the Karabakh peace process." Russia's ouster from the process would be tantamount to a "national disaster" for Armenia, he said.

Ter-Petrosyan acknowledged on Friday that for many of his ardent supporters his decision not hold more rallies in the capital in the coming months will be "difficult to digest." But he insisted that further street protests would "weaken Serzh Sarkisian's positions and thereby increase possibilities of exerting external pressure on him and clinching concessions from him."

## Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Could Be Resolved This Year

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by one of the conflicting parties to resolve the Karabakh dispute by force, he said: "I think that danger, which always exists, has somewhat receded because the war in Georgia reminded everyone in this region how terrible

war is. There are some who are always tempted to talk in fiery language. But war is no joke. It's a bad option."

The U.S. diplomat spoke to RFE/RL after holding talks in Yerevan with President Serzh Sarkisian, Prime Minister Tigran Sarkisian and representatives of Armenia's main opposition

## Armenia Fund Launches 11th International Telethon Campaign

LOS ANGELES -- Armenia Fund U.S. Western Region has announced the launch of its 11th International Telethon campaign. The live fundraising program will air on television sets in all major Armenian-American communities in the U.S. and across the globe on November 27, 2008, 8am-8pm PST as well as on the internet at [www.armenianfund.org](http://www.armenianfund.org).

On Friday, October 10, Armenia Fund's long time supporters and donors gathered at the residence of Mr. Armen Khachatourian and Mrs. Maria Mehranian to unveil the 2008 Telethon logo. The unveiling has become a tradition over the past years and marks the important launch date of the campaign. Present at the special dinner reception was the former President of Nagorno Karabakh Republic, H.E. Arkady Ghoukassian. The president currently serves on the international board of trustees of Armenia Fund.

Present at the event were all board member organizations of Armenia Fund: Armenian Assembly of America, the Armenian Catholic Exharchate of America, the Armenian Democratic Liberal (Ramgavar) Party, the Armenian Evangelical Union of North America, the Armenian General Benevolent Union, the Armenian Relief Society, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, the Social Democratic Hunchakian Party, the Western Diocese of the Armenian Church, the Western Prelacy of the Armenian Church.

Throughout the evening, attendees at the event got a first hand update on the progress of Armenia Fund's projects, including the Hadrut Regional Hospital, Togh School and the Amaras highway – all major projects of the U.S. Western Region affiliate of the Fund. Mrs. Maria Mehranian, Chairperson of Armenia Fund, Inc. welcomed all guests and thanked them for their continuous financial and moral support. Archbishop Moushegh Mardirossian, Prelate of the Western Prelacy of the Armenian Church of America convened the opening prayer and offered his blessings. Mardirossian highly commended the projects of Armenia Fund and its dedication to enhancing the lives of the Armenian people.

Mr. Sarkis Kotanjian, Executive Director and Public Relations Manager of the Fund's Western U.S. affiliate, provided an extensive and detailed update on the progress of the major projects. Kotanjian also reminded everyone that Armenia Fund does not

alliance. Efforts by the United States and other international mediators to help settle Karabakh conflict were high on the agenda of the talks.

Fried said he also urged the Armenian leaders to release opposition members that were arrested following the February presidential election on what the U.S. considers politically motivated charges. "My message was it's important to get past this and resolve it," he said. "The longer people remain detained, the longer there will be a cloud."

Fried said the Sarkisian admin-



Telethon 2008 "My Home, Armenia" logo unveiled

only focus on infrastructure and rural development, but continues to provide monetary assistance to the families and children affected from the war.

Mr. Edik Balaian, the artist of the 2008 Telethon logo offered his brief remarks regarding the concept of the logo and choice of colors. He mentioned that the colors of the logo are distinctly from the palette of legendary Armenian artist Minas Avetisyan.

Armenia Fund Honorary Member, Philanthropist Vahe Karapetian who has stood by Armenia Fund since its inception, introduced the former President. In his remarks Karapetian highly commended the recent projects of Armenia Fund and praised its interim management in Yerevan.

President Ghoukassian, Consul-General Armen Liloyan, along with the leadership of Armenia Fund unveiled the logo. It features an Armenian village house with a tricolor smoke rising from its chimney – a sign that the house is not a mere structure but rather an Armenian family home. The slogan of the Telethon campaign is "My Home, Armenia".

The event also secured participation of 400 members of the community in the Armenia Fund Annual Gala. The Gala will be held on Sunday, November 23, 2008 at the Hyatt Regency Century Plaza Hotel in Century City, California. The event will welcome H.E. Bako Sahakyan, President of Nagorno Karabakh Republic. The evening's keynote speaker will be the newly appointed Minister of Diaspora Affairs of Armenia, the Honorable Hranush Hakobyan.

istration should "deal with the consequences" of Armenia's post-election unrest with the kind of "great leadership and courage" that it has shown in seeking to improve relations with Turkey. He also made the point that the democratization of Armenia's political system will be a "slow process."

"Obviously, Armenia has a great deal to do to build democracy," he said. "Let's be realistic. This is going to be a slow, incremental process. It needs to go in the right direction and it needs to move forward."