



STATEMENT

DEMONSTRATIONS AND MEDIA REPORTING REPRESSED IN GEORGIA

8 November 2007

ARTICLE 19, the Global Campaign for Free Expression, is deeply concerned about the suppression of peaceful demonstrations and the closure of several media outlets in Georgia.

On 2 November 2007, thousands of protestors gathered outside the Georgian Parliament calling for early parliamentary elections and demanding the resignation of President Mikhail Saakashvili, amid accusations of authoritarianism and corruption. The government rejected the demonstrators' demand for early elections and yesterday broke up protests in Tbilisi, using batons, tear gas and rubber bullets against unarmed demonstrators. As a result of violent clashes with the police, 500 people have sought medical treatment; among the injured was Georgia's Public Defender (Human Rights Ombudsman) Sozar Subari. The violence was followed by President Saakashvili's declaration of a 15-day State of emergency, entailing bans on all kind of protests, strikes and demonstrations and prohibiting all television and radio broadcasting, with the exception of Georgia's public broadcaster. The media that have been silenced include the opposition outlets *Imedi* and *Kavkasia* and international news channels such as CNN, BBC and Euronews.

Moreover, on the evening of 7 November, the offices of *Imedi TV* were stormed by the riot police, who demanded the immediate suspension of broadcasting. Particularly worrying is the brutality of this attack. According to our information, masked and armed police officers pointed their guns at employees and destroyed equipment. This is despite *Imedi's* assurances that no-one was going to resist. The station stopped broadcasting by the evening of 7 November. Broadcasts of *Imedi* radio station were also suspended and the website made inaccessible. Riot police used tear gas to

disperse several dozen people outside the station's premises, who had gathered to support the channel. Shortly after another opposition television station, *Kavkasia*, a relatively small station broadcasting serving only Tblisi, went off the air.

During the demonstrations *Imedi* carried extensive coverage of the opposition demonstrations and statements by opposition leaders. It was strongly criticised by high-level public officials for inciting protesters.

Georgia has ratified the *European Convention on Human Rights* and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, which, among others, protect the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Freedom of expression constitutes one of the essential foundations of a democratic society and imposes on governments the duty to guarantee the expression of pluralistic political ideas and unhindered access to views and sources of information which challenge the status quo. This guarantee is applicable not only to information or ideas that are favourably received, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population. Moreover, it is exactly at times of political instability that people have a need for accurate and comprehensive information from a variety of sources.

ARTICLE 19 calls on the Georgian government to:

- Immediately allow the resumption of broadcasting by *Imedi* and *Kavkasia* radio and television channels, as well as all other independent local and international channels.
- Allow access to websites.
- Ensure that people are able to exercise their right to express their views and opinions, including through peaceful demonstrations.