

The South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders

The South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders unites 30 human rights NGOs in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The Network seeks to facilitate creation of a safer and enabling environment for human rights defenders in the South Caucasus and to strengthen their voices in the region and internationally.

Statement of the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders and Human Rights House Tbilisi

The members of the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders and the Human Rights House Tbilisi are alarmed by the information that representatives of Adjara Autonomous Republic Division of Special Operative Department (SOD) within the Ministry of Interior of Georgia have attempted to exert pressure and blackmail Tedo Jorbenadze, the head of the investigative reporting team of the “Batumelebi” Newspaper. We call upon the Georgian authorities to promptly investigate this and previous incidents of pressure on “Batumelebi” and take all appropriate measures to ensure safe and enabling environment for all journalists in Georgia.

According to the newspaper “Batumelebi”, in the evening of November 25, 2009 Tedo Jorbenadze, head of investigative reporting team of Batumi-based newspaper Batumelebi was invited to the office of Adjara Autonomous Republic Division of Special Operative Department (SOD) within the Ministry of Interior of Georgia. In the SOD office, law enforcers showed him black and white photos of two men in underwear. They told him that one of them was Mr. Jorbenadze. However, as Mr. Jorbenadze claims he could not identify himself in any of the men on the photos. They told Mr. Jorbenadze that special services of foreign countries – in particular, of Russia and Turkey were interested in newspaper and since Mr. Jorbenadze was one of the decision-makers in the newspaper, he had to cooperate with Georgian law enforcers. When Mr. Jorbenadze refused, the SOD officers blackmailed Mr. Jorbenadze by using stigma on sexual orientation in Georgia and told him they would send additional video materials to his relatives and co-workers and upload them on Internet to discredit him.

It should be noted that this is not the first case when the journalists of newspaper Batumelebi have been threatened. In June, 2008, an anonymous author sent an e-mail to the newspaper with death threats. According to Eter Turadze, Editor-in-chief of the newspaper, strangers followed her car at late night in the Memed Abashidze Avenue before this June event. The editor board reported the incident to the prosecutor’s office of Adjara Autonomous Republic.

On January 23, 2009 the Special Operative Department deprived the liberty of Natia Rokva, a journalist of the newspaper Batumelebi for a short time. Ms. Rokva had taken pictures of special operation in the centre of Batumi and refused to delete them under the order of the law enforcers. The newspaper Batumelebi applied to Adjara prosecutor’s office and requested to investigate the case. However, the prosecutor’s office replied: „It has been established that the law enforcement officers did not do anything illegal against Natia Rokva. Consequently, there is no legal ground to start investigation.” No other instances of intimidation of journalists of newspaper Batumelebi have been investigated.

According to Mzia Amaghlobeli, publisher of the newspaper Batumelebi, Tedo Jorbenadze has submitted a request to prosecutor’s office of Adjara Autonomous Republic to launch investigation on the incident.

“Batumelebi” is a regional newspaper working in Adjara region since 2001. The newspaper covers diverse topics including human rights, education, economics, conflicts and other matters of public interest. The newspaper is well-known for its quality reporting, objectivity and professionalism on national and international level. “Batumelebi” has received several international awards, including 2008 Fritt Ord and ZEIT-Stiftung Free Press Award (Norway and Germany) and the Signal for Europe award from Reporters without Borders.

“This incident shows that the government of Georgia is concerned with the fact that international community is actively supporting increase of the level of media freedom and independence in Georgia. “Batumelebi” has been pressed for a long time now – says a well-known Georgian journalist Zviad Koridze, - “when the government failed to subordinate this media outlet using financial means, it started to use method of pressing on morality.”

The South Caucasus Network and Human Rights House Tbilisi remind the government of Georgia that interference within the work of a journalist is a criminal offence prohibited by Georgian Criminal Code. Moreover, inviolability of personal life, honor and dignity is guaranteed to all by the Constitution of Georgia and numerous international human rights instruments to which Georgia is a party.

Members of the South Caucasus Network and Human Rights House Tbilisi express their concern with the incident and call upon the Georgian Prosecutor's Office to:

- make sure that the pressure on the employees of the newspaper Batumelebi is immediately stopped,
- the allegations of pressure on the journalist and the newspaper Batumelebi are promptly investigated
- violators of journalistic freedom are brought to justice.

We further ask the international community to condemn the attempt of interfering into the work of the independent media outlet.