



### **Armenia must release political activist Vardges Gaspari**

Oslo, Yerevan 26.02.2016: Since his arrest on 19 February, the well-known political activist Vardges Gaspari has been subject to torture and ill-treatment in the Nubarashen prison in Yerevan. He had initiated a hunger strike in order to be moved to a separate cell, but no response was given to his complaints by the prison administration. Information was only available as Gaspari was transported to a psychiatric hospital for a forensic examination on 24 February.

–The ill-treatment of this outspoken activist is unheard of and is clearly politically motivated, says secretary general of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee Bjørn Engesland. –When accusations of torture and ill-treatment occur, authorities are obliged to expedite immediate investigation measures and secure the victim. In this case, however, the prison staff has not only failed to do so, but has even taken part in the intimidation and ill-treatment.

Gaspari was taken into custody on 19 February, and his lawyers Tigran Yegoryan, David Gyurjyan and Lousineh Hakobyan immediately protested the detention as illegal and politically motivated. On 24 February the lawyers were informed of the psychiatric examination only last moment, and barely made it to the hospital in time to meet him.

Based on a note Gaspari managed to pass on to his lawyers yesterday, they issued a statement that *“he has been tortured (by beating and other methods) by his inmates of the cell N20 and later the cell N7 in the “Nubarashen” penitentiary under the direction and connivance of the prison administration. He has been subjected to psychological and physical pressures, inhuman and degrading treatment by beating, swearing, pouring cold water on him, threatening (“you won’t get out of here alive”), etc. All the complaints of Gaspari addressed to the prison administration have been left without a response.”*

Head of the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly Vanadzor office Artur Sakunts saw Gaspari at the hospital and managed to talk to him.

–Gaspari was very weak and almost lost consciousness in front of me, says Sakunts. –He needs proper medical attention, access to legal assistance of his own choosing and should be immediately released from the prison where he has suffered this horrible treatment, Sakunts concludes.

On 25 February, Gaspari was back in the cell where he had suffered the torture, and his lawyer Yegoryan was refused a meeting with his client. Yegoryan was also informed that he and Hakobyan allegedly had been removed as Gaspari’s defence counsel by a judge. The lawyers have issued a

complaint on this decision as one of a range of unlawful and disproportional decisions against Vardges Gaspari.

Gaspari is well known for non-violent protests to demonstrate his opinion of the judicial and political system in Armenia. He has participated in several demonstrations and protests in Armenia over the last years and has gained the nick-name "Armenia's Gandhi" for his sit-down approach. Earlier this month, he received an additional criminal charge, allegedly for hindering the vote during the 6 December 2015 Constitutional referendum, where he was an election observer with the Citizen Observer initiative. The court case that prompted the psychiatric examination follows accusations that he allegedly insulted police officers and a judge in court in April 2014. Gaspari has refused to attend the hearings, and was repeatedly taken to court by force.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee and the Helsinki Citizens Assembly Vanadzor consider the ill-treatment and refusal of contact with his lawyers in clear violation of Vardges Gaspari's fundamental rights and Armenia's international obligations. Gaspari must be urgently released, the criminal investigation against him halted, and he must receive adequate medical treatment for his injuries.

Criminal investigation must be initiated to establish the guilty parties for the ill-treatment he suffered in the custody of the law enforcement bodies of the Republic of Armenia and the lack of adequate response. Correspondence with legal assistance of his own choosing must be reinstated and facilitated immediately.