

Unease at Soldiers' Deaths in Armenia

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Concerns that bullying in the military is causing fatalities recorded as accident or suicide.

Gohar and Suren Ohanjanyan have been battling for three years to find out how and why their son died while he was serving in the Armenian military.

Tigran Ohanjanyan was just one of dozens of young soldiers to die in a wave of suicides and accidental deaths.

The armed forces insist that Tigran's death in August 2007 was an accident, caused when he touched a rope hanging down from an antenna mast, which electrocuted him.

His parents refuse to accept this version of events. They say that after talking to his army friends, they have been left convinced he was murdered.

"Three years after his death, they're still unable to demonstrate that he died as a result of an accident," his mother Gohar said. "When we met the defence minister, I said they should either solve my son's murder or admit that they can't. Then I will dig up my child's grave and remove his body."

Tigran's father Suren says he suspects his son was murdered by a group of individuals. He says he has received anonymous calls warning him off investigating the case further.

"If my son died of an electric shock, then who's threatening us, and why?" his wife added.

Campaigners for army reforms say that incidents like Tigran Ohanjanyan's death are too frequent. According to the defence ministry's web site, in the period between June 27 and October 3 this year, there were nine suicides and accidental deaths in the military.

Defence Minister Seyran Ohanyan used a speech to parliament to try to reassure the public.

"I don't think that in a deteriorating situation, it is right to organise such a large campaign against the defence ministry," he said. "Criminal proceedings have been launched into every case involving the death of a soldier. Serious action is being taken to prevent more cases of this kind in the armed forces. I personally meet the parents of the deceased soldiers."

According to Artur Sakunts, head of the Vanadzor office of another human rights group, the Helsinki Civil Assembly, 31 soldiers have been killed this year, only eight of whom were killed on the dividing line where Armenian soldiers face their Azerbaijani counterparts in a tense stand-off.

Sakunts said the failure to investigate non-combat deaths was fuelling public unease.

The death of Lieutenant Artak Nazaryan on July 27, which was initially recorded as suicide, caused a wave of public concern. After his mother protested to the defence ministry, calling his death "premeditated, cold-blooded, calculated murder", a fresh investigation resulted in the arrest of several soldiers.

Public anger increased after a video was posted on the internet showing two young men in army uniforms being savagely beaten by fellow-soldiers. The footage spread quickly on social networking sites.

Some human rights activists say the military lacks the will to tackle endemic bullying.

"In most non-combat army deaths, those responsible are not prosecuted. Lesser individuals are made scapegoats, innocent people are convicted, cases are covered up, and all this generates new crimes," human rights activist Avetik Ishkhanian, president of the Helsinki Committee, said.

Armen Harutyunyan, head of the Human Rights Ombudsman's office, told IWPR, "The army needs to engage with these problems. But we also have to help – the army cannot single-handedly eradicate tendencies that are present in society."

The ombudsman has received 39 complaints relating to the defence ministry so far this year.

The opposition Armenian National Congress has expressed concern that soldiers who are subjected to humiliation in their own ranks will be in no fit state to defend the country in time of need.

"The army is being destroyed," he said.

President Serzh Sargsyan brushed such criticisms aside, accusing opposition politicians of seizing on tragedy to score political points.

“I feel very badly about this.... tendency to blacken the army out of exclusively narrow political and party interest,” he said. “There’s never been a time when soldiers and officers haven’t been killed in the army, or when there were no accidents, because our army is a very large organisation.”

Parliament is currently considering a bill amending disciplinary procedures in the military so that soldiers would be allowed to refuse to obey orders that contradict the constitution or national laws.

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