
Clinton Hails Armenian Media, Civic Groups

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Armenia -- U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton addresses journalists and civic activists in Yerevan, 5 July 2010.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton heaped praise on Armenian pro-democracy groups and pledged continued U.S. support for their activities as she ended a landmark visit to Yerevan on Monday.

Meeting with two dozen local journalists, human rights campaigners and other civic activists, she also expressed concern about media freedom in Armenia and, in particular, a controversial broadcasting bill enacted by the authorities recently.

Clinton said she raised the matter with President Serzh Sarkisian on Sunday and was assured by him that the Armenian government is 'open' to making further changes in the Law on Television and Radio.

The government pushed a raft of amendments to that law through parliament last month amid a storm of criticism from local media associations. They say the amendments will enable the Sarkisian administration to retain its strong influence on the news coverage of virtually all Armenian broadcasters.

The United States as well as the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe have also expressed concern. A member of an Armenian government task force that drafted the bill told RFE/RL's Armenian service on June 16 that the authorities will not amend the law further despite the domestic and international criticism.

'Whatever specific work you are doing -- whether it be for fair and free elections or better access to healthcare or greater flow of information or trying to heal the wounds of history -- I thank you and urge you to continue,' Clinton said in her opening remarks at the meeting. 'The challenges that you are facing are not greater than the challenges that Armenia has already overcome.'

Armenia -- President Serzh Sarkisian and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton meet in Yerevan, 4 July 2010.

'And please know that the United States and the Obama administration and the American people are standing with you as you help lead your country into that future of promise and potential that every Armenian deserves,' she said.

Issues related to Armenia's democratization were reportedly on the agenda of Clinton's talks with Sarkisian and Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian the previous night. She told reporters afterwards that she underlined 'the importance of advancing democracy' in the country.

Democracy and respect for human rights is 'vital for Armenia's long-term security, stability and prosperity,' Clinton said on Sunday evening. 'And as a friend and a partner who believes in Armenia's future, we will continue to support Armenia's civil society and efforts to promote good governance and transparency,' she added.

In her public statements, the top U.S. diplomat made no mention of the continuing imprisonment of more than a dozen Armenian opposition leaders and members arrested following the disputed February 2008 presidential election. The U.S. ambassador to Armenia, Marie Yovanovitch, insisted earlier this year that their fate remains 'an issue of concern to us.'

The U.S. State Department has also been very critical of the Armenian authorities' human rights record in its annual reports on human rights practices around the world. The most recent report released in March said they have continued to stifle dissent, manipulate elections, tolerate police brutality and restrict judicial independence over the past year.

Still, the main opposition Armenian National Congress (HAK) has repeatedly accused the West and the U.S. in particular of being lenient towards Sarkisian because of his Western-backed policies toward Turkey and Azerbaijan.

The unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Turkish-Armenian relations were the main highlight of Clinton's talks with the Armenian leaders. 'Armenia and the United States concur on numerous issues relating to international affairs,' Nalbandian told journalists on Sunday. That includes a Karabakh settlement based on 'the principles of international law,' he said.

'We have agreed to seek a further strengthening and deepening of our friendly partnership,' added the Armenian minister.

'Secretary Clinton's visit highlighted the U.S. Government's strong partnership with Armenia,' read a separate statement issued by the U.S. Embassy in Yerevan.
