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NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE

5/5 Alek Manukyan Street, Yerevan, Republic of Armenia
Tel: +37411-785-657; E-mail: natdemalliance@gmail.com; Website: https://www.ajbever.com

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Contact: Diana Banister
contact@sovereignglobalsolutions.com

Human rights experts warn congressional leaders of Armenia government's repression of the Church

Washington D.C. – The National Defense Alliance (NDA), Armenia's largest pro-Western conservative political party, held a briefing on Capitol Hill that featured international human rights experts who alerted Members of Congress and their staff to Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's imprisonment and repression of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the oldest institution in the first established Christian nation.

Earlier this year, Pashinyan unleashed aggressive tactics to silence church leaders, publicly attacking its leader, the Catholicos, imprisoning bishops and detaining a number of clergy and church leaders in an attempt to usurp its independence and undermine its influence.

"If you haven't traveled to Armenia recently, it may be difficult to imagine how repressive the political atmosphere has become," said Dr. Joel Veldkamp of Christian Solidarity International, who recently traveled to the country. "Armenia is witnessing a systematic state-led campaign to undermine, divide, and persecute Armenia's national church. The arrests of clergy and the prime minister's demand that the Catholicos of All Armenians resign from his post - is a flagrant assault on religious freedom.

"On October 19, two days after a lawyer for the detained clergy was dragged out of his car and arrested in the street, a group of human rights NGOs in Armenia made a public statement condemning the 'selective, punitive, disproportionate and unlawful application of criminal justice mechanisms' by the government in its campaign against the church."

On November 5, the Armenian Center for Public Rights published a comprehensive report detailing how the Armenian government has used "falsified evidence and selective prosecution to imprison members of the clergy, and publicly incited hate against the church."

International legal scholars Peter Flew and Lauren Homer, an attorney at Law and Liberty International explained how the Church and religious freedom in Armenia is constitutionally mandated. Article 18.1 states: "The Republic of Armenia shall recognize the exclusive mission of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church, as a national church, in the spiritual life of the Armenian people, in the development of their national culture and preservation of their national identity."

"The unbroken nature of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church's 1700 years of service has played a critical role, not least during times of imperial subjugation and genocide, of acting as a receptacle

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of Armenian nationality and culture," said Flew, who is the author of a new report *Nikol Pashinyan and the Persecution of Samvel Karapetyan and the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church*. "The Church acts as Armenia's conscience and memory – not least with respect to Nagorno Karabakh."

"The prime minister is behaving like the worst kind of autocrat, imprisoning dissenting voices and seeking to recreate a parallel church structured around figures he controls," stated Corentin Clerc of France-based SOS Chrétiens d'Orient, who lived in Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh war with Azerbaijan. "Anxious to give in to aggressive Pan-Turkism and to reshape Armenian society on a globalist and secular model, the Armenian government is waging a merciless war against traditional values and against the Armenian Church, the last bastion of Armenian identity."

Pashinyan's government is also promoting anti-Christian values, such as gender ideology and LGBTQ rights, challenging traditional family structure, removing all religious references from public places including Mount Ararat from stamps, and allowing the enemy to occupy its territory and holy sites without repelling them, Clerc pointed out.

"Over the centuries, the Armenian Church has sheltered the Armenian soul, even in the absence of a territorial state entity," said Clerc. "As the guarantor of Armenian identity, it is now the target of a full-scale attack by the central government for daring to remind the latter of its responsibilities and denounce the threats weighing on the country."

Dr. David A. Grigorian, a Harvard economist and NDA supporter, agrees. "Armenia is under attack by its own government, which makes things complicated for those who are trying to save it from an impending aggression by Azerbaijan." He sees a greater role for the Armenian diaspora and friends of Armenia in Washington in shedding light on Pashinyan's misdeeds and making him accountable for them.

Armenians in the homeland and the diaspora in the U.S. concerned about the future of their Church, the abandonment of Armenians and holy sites in the Artsakh and the loss of the country's Christian heritage and sovereignty will continue to educate and inform American leaders of the situation.

To view the briefing, please go to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6Hf_0yYHXo. For more information, please contact Diana Banister, *dbanister@sovereignglobalsolutions.com*

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