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Ukraine: Address Attacks against Activists and Human Rights Defenders

(Kyiv, October 3, 2018) - More than 50 attacks on activists and human rights defenders in Ukraine have been recorded by local human rights organizations in just the last nine months, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House and Frontline Defenders said today. Those under attack include people working to defend the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, protect the environment, and campaign against corruption.

The organizations criticized the lack of effective investigations into these incidents and of prosecutions of those responsible, which heightens the risk to human rights defenders and sends a message that the authorities tolerate such attacks and assaults. Recently, the prosecutor general suggested that civil society activists [brought the attacks on themselves](#) for criticizing the authorities, giving an impression that human rights defenders can be openly targeted.

In most cases, the attacks have targeted individuals or groups that campaign against corruption in the local community, shine a light on the operation of local government and businesses, or defend people's rights. The purpose of such attacks is clear: to silence activists and human rights defenders and to discourage others from speaking out against injustice and standing up for human rights.

Two recent examples of the kind of vicious attacks that have yet to be effectively investigated took place on September 22, in Odessa and Kryvyi Rih. Oleh Mikhaylyk, an anti-corruption activist, was shot in Odessa, in southern Ukraine, and remains in the hospital. Mikhaylyk had campaigned with the *Syla Lyudei* (People's Power) movement against illegal construction in Odessa. Three hundred kilometers away, in Kryvyi Rih, unidentified assailants broke into the home of Artem Moroka after he criticized the local police on Facebook. The assailants severely beat him, breaking his nose, Moroka told Ukrainian human rights monitors.

In June, an environmental activist, Mykola Bychko, was found dead under suspicious circumstances in a village in Kharkiv region. Villagers found Bychko hanged in the woods near the village of Eskhar on June 5. The local police initially started a suicide investigation, but have yet to investigate the possibility that he was killed in connection with his activism. At the time, Bychko was documenting the pollution of a local river, allegedly caused by a nearby waste treatment plant.

A lawyer representing Bychko's family questioned the conduct of the local police for ignoring the possibility that this was an intentional killing, and for allegedly intentionally delaying the investigation. The lawyer told Freedom House that police lost relevant evidence from the site where Bychko's body was found, such as the rope from the improvised gallows. The authorities have also not pursued allegations that Bychko had received threats related to his documentation work, such as questioning people from the waste treatment plant.

On July 31, an unidentified assailant threw acid on Kateryna Handzyuk, a local council member who monitored police activities, in Kherson. Local police initially arrested a man and coerced him into signing a “confession”, allegedly promising in exchange to resolve existing issues he had with the police. His sister said, however, that the man was not in Kherson on the date of the attack and had several witnesses to back his alibi.

After he spent 19 days in detention, the police released him without charge and apologized. At the same time, the police arrested five other suspects, four of whom admitted their involvement in the attack. Initially, the police did not investigate the attack as a “contract murder” attempt but as an “attempted murder,” which Handzyuk’s lawyer said has caused a significant delay in establishing who ordered the attack.

The conduct of these investigations raises concerns that those responsible for the attacks, including those who ordered them, may not be brought to justice.

The Ukrainian authorities should take effective steps to prevent further threats and attacks against activists and human rights defenders, and ensure prompt, thorough, impartial and independent investigations into such threats and attacks and bring those responsible to justice in fair trials.

The Interior Ministry, the National Police, the prosecutor general’s office, and other relevant institutions should explicitly recognize the important work of human rights defenders in protecting human rights and uncovering corruption. The authorities should publicly denounce any threats and attacks against human rights defenders. They should take decisive measures to ensure that government critics can work in a safe and enabling environment in which they can exercise the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, and conduct their activities without fear of reprisals.