



## Civil Society Organizations respond to the current events in the Rioni Valley

Social Justice Center (former EMC), GYLA, and Green Alternative respond to the events that took place in Rioni Valley, yesterday, on April 11<sup>th</sup>, and that resulted in a flagrant and unjustifiable restriction of the freedom of assembly and expression of protesters against Namakhvani HPP. We believe that the law enforcement measures taken by the government in the course of the past few days bear particularly severe and rights-violating character; those measures should cease immediately and unconditionally, and the actions of the authorities comply with the human rights framework.

Yesterday, on April 11<sup>th</sup>, police dismantled the tents of the Rioni Valley Guards, located on the land of one of the protesters in the Rioni Valley - village of Namokhvani. Starting from the morning, these actions of the police were accompanied by the mobilization of a particularly large police force and the absolute restriction of movement in the direction of Namokhvani, including the movement of protesters towards the camp area.

The Ministry of Interior Affairs put out completely different and contradictory versions as to the basis for removing of the tents in Namokhvani. [An official statement](#) of the Ministry referred to the danger related to the rising water levels in the Rioni river and consequent flooding of the surrounding area. However, representatives of the Ministry that were present at the spot stated that the basis for dismantling of the tents was the obstruction of the ongoing search and rescue operations, as well as the unreliable behavior of the locals which could result in the risk of self-drowning in Rioni river.

We believe that the justification of its actions by the Ministry of Interior Affairs is completely inconsistent and unconvincing, is aimed at disrupting the peaceful and lawful protest of the Rioni Valley Guards, and constitutes a grave, unjustified and disproportionate interference with the freedom of assembly and expression. This is further confirmed by the fact that although Rioni Valley Guards requested from the police to allow setting up the tents in a different area in the village of Namokhvani, as an alternative to dismantled tents on numerous occasions, this possibility was unreasonably denied by the Ministry. Eventually, the protesters had to leave their protest site in the village of Namokhvani and relocated close to other participants of the demonstration near the village of Gumati. It is worth noting that on April 11<sup>th</sup>, the restriction of movement, apart from the guards of the valley, affected media representatives as well. [The Charter of Journalistic Ethics](#) and [the Coalition for Media Advocacy](#) considered this restriction unjustified.

Furthermore, in parallel to the dismantling of the tents, it was reported that "alcohol bottles were removed from the area of the tents", which was perceived as an attempt to discredit their movement by the protesters. The doubts about the accuracy of this information are intensified by the internal rules and practices established in the protesters' camp that imply strict control of the rules of conduct and prohibition of the consumption of alcohol.

Public should be reminded that the decision on the removal of the tents was preceded by an accident that took place in the proximity of the camp area on April 10<sup>th</sup>. From around 8 p.m. one of the persons from the tents of Rioni Valley Guards disappeared and is being searched in the Rioni River. This incident allowed the Ministry of Interior Affairs to strengthen the law enforcement control at the camp area and led to the additional mobilization of police and special forces in the valley and the dismantling of the tents the next day.

The public is also aware that since April 3<sup>rd</sup>, the events in the Rioni Valley have been unfolding amid intensified law enforcement control from the side of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, while freedom of movement of the supporters of protest and local population remained restricted in the valley. By installing police checkpoints on both roads leading to the village of Namokhvani, the Ministry of Interior Affairs unjustifiably restricted freedom of movement which was considered as an unfounded and disproportionate interference with fundamental rights both by [civil society organizations](#) and the [Public Defender](#). We believe that the unsubstantiated law enforcement measures that commenced on April 3<sup>rd</sup> and are ongoing up until now, were designed to reduce the number of people gathered in the village of Namokhvani and ultimately, enforce the decision of removing the tents without any complications.

At the moment, the Rioni Valley Guards and their supporters are mobilized at the police checkpoint near the village of Gumati, demanding entry and the permit to re-set up tents in the village of Namokhvani. Other supporters of the demonstration are also gathering near the village of Gumati. It is key that the Ministry of Interior Affairs refrains from restricting the freedom of movement and assembly and ensures the compliance of its actions with human rights standards. It should be underlined that Rioni Valley Guards made continuous efforts for and repeatedly stated their intention to contain ongoing processes within the boundaries of peaceful assembly and expression. This intention was confirmed by their actions yesterday when in order to maintain peace on the ground they did not resist physically to the restrictions imposed by police

In the current situation, it is crucial authorities realize that such a blatant and unjustifiable violation of the fundamental rights of the Rioni Valley Guards generates the risks of further complication of the process. These risks are not only uninsured but also further aggravated by the law enforcement measures taken by authorities which

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is why any further development of the processes will be considered as the responsibility of the government.

Considering the above:

We call on to the Ministry of Interior Affairs:

- To ensure the compliance of its actions with the legal framework, and the protection of freedom of assembly and expression of the Rioni Valley Guards and their supporters, including through restoring freedom of movement. Protesters should be allowed to continue the assembly in Namokhvani village;

We call on the Government of Georgia:

- To conceive its responsibility to preserve the public interest and conduct respective processes based on principles of human rights and democracy; to renounce the illegal, repressive forms of continuing the construction of Namakhvani HPP and to put the ongoing processes back to the format of public, participatory dialogue, which we consider to be the only way to resolve the existing problem;

We call on to the international organizations, embassies, and institutions working on human rights issues:

- To take all measures within their mandate and resources in order to ensure that the processes taking place in Rioni Valley will develop democratically and peacefully, in conformity with human rights standards.

## **Signatory Organizations:**

- Social Justice Center (former EMC)
- Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA)
- Green Alternative