

TRACKING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ARMENIA'S
2023-2025 HUMAN RIGHTS ACTION PLAN:

**ACHIEVEMENTS AND GAPS IN RIGHT
TO LIFE IN THE ARMED FORCES**

A MID-TERM REVIEW
| 2023-2024

Publication of this report is supported by Democracy Development Foundation. The opinions and analysis expressed in the report are those of the authors and do not represent opinions and positions of Democracy Development Foundation.



The study was conducted by Peace Dialogue NGO with funding provided by the Democracy Development Foundation.



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INTRODUCTION

For over a decade, Peace Dialogue NGO has been committed to promoting human rights within Armenia's defense sector. Since 2015, the organization's monitoring group has regularly assessed human rights conditions in this field. Peace Dialogue also participates in the Coordinating Council overseeing the implementation of the 2023-2025 Action Plan, part of the National Strategy of the Republic of Armenia for the Protection of Human Rights, as outlined in Government Decision No. 1674-L, dated September 28, 2023. The organization also works to identify challenges within the defense sector and foster collaborative efforts to address them.

This report specifically focuses on monitoring the actions planned by the Armenian Government for the 2023-2024 period, with a particular focus on protecting the right to life within the defense sector.

The monitoring process had two primary objectives:

- *To assess the relevance of the actions outlined in the Armenian Government's 2023-2025 Action Plan, derived from the National Strategy for the Protection of Human Rights.*
- *To determine whether these actions were implemented as planned and evaluate their contribution to the Government's overall goals.*

According to the 2023-2025 Action Plan, the overarching goal concerning the right to life is to ensure its effective protection in the armed forces, during criminal proceedings, when interacting with law enforcement agencies, while serving a sentence in penitentiary institutions, or when other coercive measures are applied.

EXPECTED IMPACT:

- *By the end of 2025, cases of non-statutory relations (including disciplinary and criminal offenses) in the Armed Forces are expected to decrease by at least 15%, based on 2022 statistics (not included in 2023-2025 Action Plan document).*
- *By the end of 2025, the number of deaths of servicemen and individuals deprived of liberty in non-combat conditions, both in the armed forces and in penitentiary institutions, is expected to decrease by at least 25%, based on 2022 statistics (not included in 2023-2025 Action Plan document).*

The Armenian government outlined one key action aimed at protecting the right to life in the armed forces: strengthening the atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect as a crucial component of safeguarding the right to life. To this end:

- *Six videos on the importance of military discipline will be developed and distributed through mass media and in high schools (as social videos).*
- *100% of psychologist-officers in the Armed Forces will receive specialized training.*

ASSESSMENT OF THE STRATEGIC RELEVANCE OF THE ACTIONS

To evaluate the relevance of the Armenian Government's 2023-2025 Action Plan, Peace Dialogue submitted inquiries to the Ministry of Defence and conducted anonymous interviews with former conscripts across Armenia.

Between 2021 and 2023, Peace Dialogue's research identified the top five causes of non-combat deaths in the Armenian Army: fatal accidents (28%)—including incidents involving military vehicles, equipment, and other accidents leading to the deaths of military personnel; health-related issues (24%); ceasefire violations—where soldiers were killed by adversaries outside of active military engagements (21%); intentional or unintentional murders (16%); and suicides (11%).

In-depth anonymous interviews conducted with 60 former conscripts who completed mandatory military service between 2020 and 2024 revealed that, according to 19 respondents, non-combat deaths occurred during their service, with some respondents mentioning more than one case. When asked about the causes of these deaths, 3 cited health-related causes, 6 mentioned accidents, 12 pointed to suicides, 4 reported murders, and 3 were unsure of the exact causes.

Peace Dialogue requested details from the Ministry regarding 46 deaths due to health problems recorded in the Armed Forces between 2021 and 2023, 10 of which were classified as linked to military service. It is important to note that the Prosecutor General's office categorizes fatalities as either "linked to military service" or "not linked to military service." Deaths linked to military service include those that occur during active duty or mandatory conscription, while deaths that happen during holidays, outside the place of service, or unrelated to military duties are categorized as not linked to military service, depending on the specific details of each case. Peace Dialogue specifically sought clarification on whether any of the deceased servicemen had reported health complaints or received medical treatment during their service.

The Ministry confirmed the number of deaths but referred to ongoing criminal investigations, advising Peace Dialogue to contact law enforcement for further information. However, they did not specify whether any of the servicemen had reported health issues or received medical treatment during their service.

During the anonymous interviews, Peace Dialogue also investigated whether there were instances where soldiers with serious health issues were denied medical support. The majority of respondents (37) indicated that no such cases occurred during their service, while 4 individuals reported that such cases did exist. Additionally, 19 respondents were unaware of any such incidents.

The interviews further explored the quality of medical care provided in military units. 27 respondents reported that proper medical assistance was given when needed. However, 17 mentioned that only basic medicine was provided without further treatment. 8 respondents indicated that proper assistance was not provided at all, while 3 noted that soldiers were sent to the hospital for treatment. 5 respondents chose not to answer this question.

Interestingly, 52 out of 60 respondents reported that their military units had servicemen who were categorized as fit for duty with limitations by the conscription's medical commission. While some units adhered to these restrictions, a significant number of respondents stated that these limitations were often ignored or only partially enforced. In

some cases, compliance was only achieved through personal connections, suggesting a lack of systematic enforcement. Feedback from respondents further illustrated that servicemen's health concerns were not always taken seriously, potentially leading to harmful outcomes.

One respondent shared: "The spine of one of the servicemen was visibly crooked—yet he was always doing the hardest work."

Since the Armenian Government prioritized strengthening the atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect as a crucial component of safeguarding the right to life, Peace Dialogue sought to assess the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, conflicts, and social hierarchies within military units, focusing on arguments, social tensions, harassment, and how these issues were resolved. Of the 60 respondents, 32 reported having argued or fought with fellow soldiers, while 25 did not, and 3 provided no answer. According to respondents, disputes were often resolved through negotiation and adaptation, with officers either unaware of or not intervening in these situations. Additionally, 24 respondents indicated that there were soldiers disliked by everyone. The reasons for this dislike often stemmed from perceptions of arrogance, irresponsibility, or favoritism from officers and commanders. Notably, these soldiers were frequently viewed as "informers" who reported others to officers or the Military Police, which alienated them from their peers.

Harassment was a prevalent issue within military units, with 37 respondents reporting that certain servicemen were oppressed, harassed, and forced to do undesirable work. These individuals were often soldiers who could not defend themselves (34 respondents) or those who did not follow hygiene rules, were caught lying, or were harassed for their sexual orientation. The data reveals that harassment ranged from exploitation (21 respondents) and mockery (15 respondents) to more severe cases of physical or psychological violence (9 respondents) or inhuman treatment (5 respondents). Property theft and other degrading behaviors were also mentioned. One respondent noted that harassment was culturally ingrained, stating, "There was a mentality to harass the miserable, but if the officer doesn't allow it, they won't."

Despite this, only 7 respondents indicated that officers intervened in such situations, suggesting that higher-ups were involved in certain instances but not consistently. This inconsistency indicates that while harassment was often perceived as a norm, the involvement of commanders could either enable or prevent such behavior. Harassment emerged as a key issue, particularly for vulnerable soldiers who could not defend themselves or were part of marginalized groups. Exploitation, bullying, and even violence were reported, and while officers occasionally stepped in, their involvement was irregular.

To understand the measures taken by the Ministry of Defence in suicide prevention, Peace Dialogue submitted an additional inquiry. Between 2021 and 2023, 16 service-related suicides were recorded. However, the Ministry did not provide substantive information on the psychological support available in the units where these incidents occurred. Peace Dialogue specifically inquired whether officer-psychologists were present in those units and whether any warning signs were identified before the suicides took place. The lack of detailed responses raises concerns about the effectiveness of mental health practices within the military.

The Ministry acknowledged that not all military units where suicides occurred had officer-psychologists due to workforce shortages. Additionally, the Ministry noted that the

servicemen who committed suicide between 2021 and 2023 were not classified as being in the "risk group."

Peace Dialogue also questioned whether any of the servicemen who committed suicide had contacted the Ministry of Defence hotline and what protocols were in place for responding to such calls. Specifically, the inquiry focused on whether hotline operators are trained to detect suicidal tendencies and what actions are taken to prevent suicides when potential risks are identified. The Ministry responded that there were no recorded cases of servicemen contacting the hotline before committing suicide. Regarding hotline procedures, the Ministry explained that the "Hotline" operates under regulatory legal acts, ministerial commands, and directives, and is governed by the charter of the Human Rights and Integrity Building Centre. Furthermore, the Ministry stated that regular training is provided to improve the skills of hotline employees.

The Ministry's responses indicate challenges in the provision of psychological support within the armed forces, particularly in the availability of officer-psychologists and the effectiveness of suicide prevention measures. While efforts are being made to improve hotline operations and provide training, the lack of detailed information on mental health practices and early intervention protocols suggests that further attention is needed to ensure comprehensive support for at-risk servicemen.

The assessment of the availability of officer-psychologists in military units revealed that out of 60 respondents, 44 confirmed the presence of an officer-psychologist in their unit. However, 12 respondents were unsure whether an officer-psychologist was present, suggesting a potential issue with communication or visibility. Even when psychologists are assigned to a unit, their roles or presence may not be well known, limiting soldiers' ability to seek support when needed. This lack of awareness could undermine the effectiveness of the mental health resources in place. Additionally, 4 respondents reported that their units did not have an officer-psychologist at all.

The data also highlights key insights into the use and perception of psychological services among servicemen. A substantial majority—38 respondents—reported that they did not personally seek psychological support during their time in the military. However, 8 respondents noted that their units had group meetings with a psychologist.

When asked about their fellow servicemen, 24 respondents indicated that they were unaware of whether others sought help from the psychologist, while 14 stated that their colleagues did not seek psychological help. Ten respondents confirmed that some of their fellow soldiers had applied for support.

Of those who applied for psychological help, 7 respondents reported that it was beneficial to their fellow soldiers. One notable case involved a soldier who sought help for self-mutilation tendencies. The psychologist intervened in a family-related issue, resulting in the soldier's transfer to another unit, which, according to the respondent, ultimately helped him. However, 3 respondents did not provide information on whether seeking help made a difference.

When respondents who did not apply for psychological services were asked why, 37 indicated that they did not feel the need for such support, while 13 mentioned a lack of trust in the system. One respondent explained that sharing personal issues with military psychologists was seen as risky, as it could lead to further complications rather than solutions. Another expressed a preference for psychologists who were independent of the

military structure, fearing that sharing problems with a psychologist within the system might lead to additional issues.

Some respondents also pointed to the lack of awareness or visibility of psychologists in their units. One respondent noted: "Officers need more psychologists—maybe we had them, but I didn't even know." This highlights a gap in communication about the availability of mental health services, which could contribute to low utilization rates.

Thus, the actions outlined in the Armenian government's 2023-2025 Action Plan—aimed at fostering tolerance, mutual respect, and strengthening military discipline—are positive steps forward but may not fully address the pressing issues highlighted by Peace Dialogue's findings.

A key concern is the handling of non-combat deaths related to health issues. Despite policies in place, there is a lack of clarity on whether servicemen with health complaints received adequate medical care, and enforcement of medical restrictions was often inconsistent. This points to gaps in health-related protections that could undermine the safety of servicemen with health vulnerabilities.

While the Action Plan emphasizes respect and discipline, conflicts, social tensions, and harassment remain significant issues within military units. Although some disputes were resolved through negotiation, reports of bullying, exploitation, and inconsistent officer intervention highlight the need for stronger leadership and stricter enforcement of anti-harassment policies. Criminal subculture, where harmful behaviors are often ignored, persists despite efforts to create a more respectful environment.

The area of suicide prevention also shows weaknesses, with inadequate psychological support and low awareness of available mental health services. Even with the plan's focus on training psychologist-officers, a significant number of servicemen expressed distrust in the system, and intervention in suicide cases was insufficient.

In conclusion, while the Armenian Government's Action Plan marks a positive step toward improving conditions in the armed forces, significant gaps remain in health protections, conflict management, and mental health support. To fully safeguard servicemen's rights and well-being, stronger enforcement of policies, more effective leadership, and a cultural shift toward accountability and care are essential.

ASSESSMENT OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ACTIONS IMPLEMENTED UNDER THE 2023-2025 ACTION PLAN, DERIVED FROM THE NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (2023-2024)

A key measure in the 2023-2025 Action Plan aimed at protecting the right to life in the armed forces is defined as Activity 1.1. Strengthening the atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect as a crucial component of safeguarding the right to life. This action includes two sub-activities:

- Development and distribution of six videos on the importance of military discipline, to be shared via mass media and in high schools as social videos. Deadline: Second half of 2025.
- Specialized training for 100% of psychologist-officers in the Armed Forces. Deadline: Second half of 2025.

As of the first half of 2024, the Government of the Republic of Armenia has reported partial completion of Action 1.1.

RESULTS OF OBSERVATIONS OF PEACE DIALOGUE NGO

Activity 1.1: Strengthening the Atmosphere of Tolerance and Mutual Respect as a Crucial Component of Safeguarding the Right to Life

The deadline for completing this activity is set for the second half of 2025.

Baseline Data:

- *In collaboration with the Council of Europe Office in Yerevan, a methodology for the study titled “Behavioral Norms of Informal Relations in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia and Socio-Psychological Problems of the Manifestation of ‘Criminal Subcultures’ Among Military Personnel” was developed. Initially scheduled for implementation in 2022, the study was postponed due to the military actions of September 13-14.*
- *Anonymous sociological surveys and individual and group discussions were conducted among contract and conscript servicemen, focusing on military welfare, camaraderie, and the negative effects of hazing and intolerance. The results were analyzed and forwarded to military unit commanders with specific instructions for implementing preventive measures.*
- *Between January 2020 and December 2022, 28 officer-psychologists received training at Vazgen Sargsyan Military University, the Moscow Military University (Russia), and the Intra Psychiatric Center.*

Measurable Indicators:

- *Six social videos emphasizing the importance of military discipline in the armed forces were produced and distributed through media outlets and at universities.*
- *The videos were created by an interdisciplinary team including a psychologist, lawyer, and military expert, following international best practices (including a gender component). Distribution strategies were based on media consumption data, considering factors such as age, psychological characteristics, and statistical patterns for effective targeting.*
- *The knowledge and skills of 100% of officer-psychologists were enhanced through training aligned with international legal standards from the UN and the Council of Europe. The training sessions lasted a minimum of four academic hours, with participants demonstrating at least 80% proficiency in post-training assessments.*

According to the Government’s 2023-2025 Action Plan Progress Report (first half of 2024):

- *An agreement was reached with the Yerevan Office of the Council of Europe to develop and distribute videos on the importance of military discipline through media outlets and in secondary schools.*
- *In collaboration with the Yerevan Office of the Council of Europe, two-day courses were organized on “Socio-psychological Problems of Behavioral Norms in Informal Relations within the Armed Forces and ‘Criminal Subcultures’ among Military Personnel.” These courses also addressed the right to life and the prohibition of cruel treatment.*
- *20% of full-time psychologists received specialized training.*

In relation to the implementation of Activity 1.1, Peace Dialogue submitted an official inquiry to the Ministry of Defence to gain clarity on several key points:

- The rationale behind the establishment of officer-psychologists within the Ministry of Defence, including whether international experiences or research guided this decision.
- Staffing levels of officer-psychologists across military units.
- Mechanisms for evaluating the performance of officer-psychologists in the armed forces.
- Statistics on servicemen seeking help from officer-psychologists, including the most common issues reported.
- Details of the training program for officer-psychologists, including the curriculum and instructors.
- The release of the video related to the action plan, which was scheduled for distribution by the end of the first semester of 2024.

In its response, the Ministry explained that the role of officer-psychologists was developed based on studies of military psychology practices in other countries, although specific countries were not mentioned. However, the Ministry did not provide detailed information about mechanisms for assessing the performance of officer-psychologists, only referencing planning and reporting documents that imply some level of oversight without clarifying evaluation criteria.

The Ministry also stated that a register has been developed to track servicemen seeking assistance from officer-psychologists. The most common issues reported were related to adaptation to military service and neuropsychological problems. However, further details on the evaluation methods used to assess officer-psychologists' effectiveness were not provided.

Regarding training, the Ministry highlighted ongoing programs for officer-psychologists, noting cooperation with the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) to promote mental health and prevent suicide in the armed forces. They also referenced the "Suicide Risk Assessment, Prevention, and Management Training Program Manual." Additionally, they noted that training sessions for officer-psychologists are held twice a year for two months at Vazgen Sargsyan Military University.

The Ministry briefly acknowledged that video recordings related to the 2023-2025 Action Plan are in development and will be shared, but no further details were provided, and the requested video has not yet been released.

During the reporting period, Peace Dialogue identified inconsistencies between the information provided in the Government's 2023-2025 Action Plan Progress Report and the Ministry of Defence's response to their inquiry:

- The ongoing officer-psychologist training programs in collaboration with the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) were not mentioned in the Government's 2023-2025 Action Plan Progress Report.
- The Government report refers to two-day courses on "Socio-psychological Problems of Behavioral Norms in Informal Relations within the Armed Forces and 'Criminal Subcultures' among Military Personnel." However, the Ministry's response mentioned two-month training courses at Vazgen Sargsyan Military University, suggesting a discrepancy in the reported duration and structure of the training programs.

CONCLUDING NOTES

The monitoring of the Armenian Government's 2023-2025 Action Plan to safeguard the right to life within the armed forces reveals both commendable progress and areas of concern. The government has taken positive steps, such as developing and distributing videos on military discipline and organizing training for psychologist-officers. These initiatives aim to foster tolerance, mutual respect, and enhance mental health support within military units.

However, the data gathered by Peace Dialogue highlights significant gaps in both the implementation and effectiveness of these actions. Non-combat deaths due to health-related issues, harassment, and inadequate psychological support remain ongoing challenges. Interviews with former conscripts suggest that medical concerns are not always properly addressed, and fitness limitations for servicemen are inconsistently enforced. Additionally, the lack of consistent intervention by officers in cases of bullying and harassment underscores the need for stronger leadership and more rigorous enforcement of policies.

In the area of suicide prevention, the Ministry of Defence's response indicates that psychological support services are not sufficiently accessible or trusted by servicemen, and hotline protocols require improvement. While the government's efforts to train psychologist-officers are a positive step, more attention is needed to ensure the well-being of military personnel.

Moreover, other causes of non-combat deaths in the Army, such as accidents and murders, are not being addressed adequately. A significant portion of fatalities in the Army results from accidents and intentional killings. While murders may be mitigated by reducing the risks of non-statutory relations and addressing issues related to the 'criminal subculture,' bullying, and harassment, further efforts are needed to tackle the issue of accidents, particularly those involving military vehicles and equipment. It is critical to analyze why these accidents occur and determine how the state can reduce the risk of such incidents involving military equipment and technology.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The government should ensure that all servicemen with health complaints receive appropriate medical treatment, and fitness limitations are enforced consistently across all units. Introducing greater transparency in tracking and reporting medical issues would help address existing gaps.
- It could be valuable for commanders and officers to receive additional training to actively intervene in cases of harassment, bullying, and social tensions. Implementing a clear zero-tolerance policy with defined guidelines and accountability measures will be essential in fostering a safer environment.
- Expanding the visibility and availability of officer-psychologists across all military units is necessary. Ensuring that psychologists are perceived as independent from the command structure could enhance trust in these services. Additionally, regular feedback from servicemen on the effectiveness of psychological support would guide necessary improvements.
- Strengthening hotline protocols to ensure early detection of suicidal tendencies is essential, along with comprehensive training for hotline operators. Awareness campaigns to encourage servicemen to seek help through confidential and accessible channels could further improve the reach and effectiveness of these services.
- Ensure consistency between the reported information and actual training programs for officer-psychologists. Addressing discrepancies in course duration and structure will be important, while regularly updating training content to reflect international best practices would help maintain its relevance and effectiveness.



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Publication of this report is supported by
Democracy Development Foundation.
The opinions and analysis expressed in the
report are those of the authors and do not
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Democracy Development Foundation.