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MOLDOVA: CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISTS AT RISK OF ARREST

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Civil society activists should not be held responsible for the rioting that took place the day after a peaceful youth protest action on 6 April in the Moldovan capital of Chişinău, Amnesty International said today. If found guilty, they could face up to eight years' imprisonment.

Amnesty International considers that they were exercising their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and if arrested for organizing a peaceful assembly for which they had notified the authorities, Amnesty International will consider them to be prisoners of conscience.

"The Moldovan authorities are obliged to protect the right to freedom of expression and assembly," said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

"They must distinguish carefully between those who are suspected of having committed criminal acts and those who have exercised their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly."

On 6 April, a group of civil society activists -- consisting of Elena Zgardan, Natalia Morari, Artur Gurău, Ion Țărnă, Ghenadie Brega and others -- informed the authorities about a demonstration of several hundred people on the Great National Assembly Square around the Ştefan the Great monument near the government buildings in the centre of Chişinău. They intended to hold a "day of mourning" for the results of the parliamentary elections in Moldova on 5 April. They announced the vigil on social networking sites, by texting on mobile phones and by word of mouth. Natalia Morar told Amnesty International that they expected no more than 300 young people to come and were amazed when as many as 10,000 joined them, including the leaders of all major opposition parties. The organizers of the vigil asked everybody to leave at 20.00, but the political leaders present continued speaking to the crowd until 20.30 and then announced that there would be a meeting at 10.00 on the following morning before dispersing peacefully.

The proposed meeting on 7 April turned into violent rioting. That day, the General Prosecutor's office published a press release announcing that the organizers and participants of the "day of mourning" had violated the provisions of the law on assemblies by failing to respect public order, involving minors, encouraging drunkenness and damaging public transport. The press release named Ghenadie Brega.

Amnesty International is concerned that there were reports of excessive use of force by police after riots on 7 April. Valentina Cusnir, an independent member of parliament, was near the main street of Chişinău at about midnight on 7 April. She told Amnesty International that she witnessed police beating up to five young people who had attempted to overturn a kiosk. She described how several policemen kicked one man "as if they were playing football". She witnessed further beatings and saw how police officers fired guns into the air to intimidate the demonstrators. Valentina Cusnir reported that she was abused by a police officer who shouted "Take her too, the bitch!" He grabbed her by the arms and when she resisted the police officer pushed her to the ground and dragged her for about

200m before letting her go. She suffered bruises and swellings on her arms and back, and possible concussion when she hit her head on the pavement.

While Amnesty International understands the police have a responsibility to protect property and to guarantee public order, the organization urges the authorities to independently and thoroughly investigate reports of use of excessive force by police. Detainees should also be promptly charged with a recognizable criminal offence or released and granted access to lawyers, doctors, and to have their families informed about their detention.

Background

As many as 15,000 people turned up at Great National Assembly square on 7 April and marched from there to the presidential and parliamentary buildings. By midday the demonstrations had turned violent. Following an initially peaceful stand-off between police and protestors on the steps of both buildings, the crowd began to push against the police line. Amnesty International staff witnessed objects being thrown by the crowd at the Presidential Administration building which was being guarded by riot police, including plastic and glass bottles, stones, eggs, bits of pavement and masonry. There are allegations that the violence was provoked by plain-clothed officers in the crowd. Despite a significant presence, riot police eventually retreated completely and demonstrators stormed both buildings. Offices were looted, fires were started and furniture and documents were thrown from windows. Both buildings remained mostly unguarded for the rest of the day.