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## **ANOTHER STABBING LINKED TO ARMENIAN ELECTION CAMPAIGN**

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By Narine Ghalechian

An activist with businessman Gagik Tsarukians electoral alliance has been stabbed and seriously wounded by men allegedly linked to the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (HHK), it emerged on Monday, March 20.

Aram Asatrian, head of the Tsarukian Blocs campaign office in the central Armen village of Kuchak, and one of his friends were attacked near their community late on Sunday. They both were rushed to a hospital in the nearby town of Aparan.

Asatrian was transferred to the Astghik Medical Center in Yerevan the following morning. The chief doctor there described his condition as grave but said the 32-year-old does not need surgery yet.

In a statement, the Armenian police said the two men were stabbed by an unknown individual. It said nothing about possible reasons for the dispute. Nor did the police report any arrests.

The mayor of Kuchak, Hovik Amirian, also would not say whether the stabbing is linked to campaigning for the April 2 parliamentary elections. Amirian said only that Asatrian is a decent and peaceful person.

Some Armenian media outlets claimed that Asatrian and his friend Manuk Hovsepian were attacked by rival election campaigners from the HHK. The ruling party did not immediately react to those allegations.

The Tsarukian Bloc likewise did not issue any statements on the incident as of Monday evening. Its representatives could not be reached for comment.

The incident occurred two days after the bloc, which claims to be in opposition to President Serzh Sarkisian, said one of its election candidates, Vahan Karapetian, was ambushed and assaulted in Yerevan's Ajapnyak by a group of HHK activists. Karapetian claimed later on Friday, however, that the violence had nothing to do with the election campaign.

The weekend stabbings were the latest in a series of violent incidents widely linked to the Armenian parliamentary race. Virtually all of them reportedly involved loyalists of wealthy HHK candidates.

In another incident, a 23-year-old activist from Tsarukians bloc was stabbed in a village near Yerevan on March 1. A top Tsarukian aide said the attack was the work of men campaigning for a

local HHK candidate.

The HHK was also blamed for even more serious pre-election violence that occurred in another village on March 14. Three local opposition supporters were attacked and seriously injured there. One of them was shot in the leg while another stabbed in the back. The party denies any involvement.

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Kaynak/Source: