

Azerbaijan: The international community must ask for the release of prisoners targeted for exercising their right to freedom of expression and association

Tuesday 19 February 2013: The International Partnership Group for Azerbaijan (IPGA), the Civic Solidarity Platform and local organisations condemn the latest crackdown on freedom of expression and association in Azerbaijan. Since the start of the year, the authorities have used repressive means to silence critical voices, including those of protesters, journalists and critics of the government.

Days after the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly passed a resolution which expressed concern about the situation in Azerbaijan on 23 January, and criticised the "restrictive implementation of freedoms with unfair trials and the undue influence of the executive," the authorities detained citizens protesting against corruption and poverty in the north western town of Ismayilli and broke up two rallies in Baku, arresting more than 70 peaceful demonstrators.

Among those detained were the prominent blogger Emin Milli, the human rights defender and Rafto Prize winner Malahat Nasibova, the human rights lawyer Intigam Aliyev, as well as the investigative journalist, Fritt Ord Foundation and ZEIT Foundation award winner Khadija Ismayilova.

Milli was required to spend 15 days in administrative detention, while four others - Abulfaz Gurbanli, Chairman of Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP) Youth Committee, Turkel Azerturk, and Tunjay Guliyev, members of this Committee, and Rufat Abdullayev, NIDA Movement member - had to spend 13 days in administrative detention. The other detainees were released after several hours, though more than 20 demonstrators received fines, some as much as AZN 3,000 for purportedly taking part in an unsanctioned peaceful demonstration under recently adopted draconian restrictions on freedom of peaceful assembly.

On 4 February a court detained Ilgar Mammadov, prominent member of the international transparency and accountability movement, board member of the Revenue Watch Institute and head of the political opposition REAL movement, who recently announced his plans to run for the presidency, and Tofiq Yaqubli, deputy head of the opposition party, Musavat and a journalist with the opposition daily, Yeni Musavat. They were remanded in pre-trial detention for two months having been charged with allegedly inciting riots in Ismayilli, where riots and mass protests took place after a car accident on January 23 that allegedly involved a close relative of the region's governor.

In a separate case on 12 February in Khachmaz district, a training on citizen participation in public policy, conducted by representatives of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center (EMDS) under a project funded by the European Union, USAID and US NDI, was disrupted by local police. Police in civilian clothes burst into the training hall and confiscated the documents of the participants. The EMDS trainers Gunay Ismayilova and Javid Nabiyev experienced police harassment and were briefly detained. Both trainers have been informed by the authorities that they remain at risk of further investigation and criminal persecution.

Harassment of journalists, writers and bloggers continues. The prosecutor is seeking to convict journalist Avaz Zeynalli, editor of 'Khural' on charges of bribery and tax evasion which could see him imprisoned for up to 11 years and barred from senior positions for a further 3 years. Zeynalli has already been in custody for more than a year after being arrested in October 2011, on the basis of a

complaint made by former MP Gular Ahmadova, who accused him of blackmail. Ms Ahmadova was herself taken into custody on 13 February 2013 charged with involvement in a corruption scam.

The 75 year-old-author Akram Aylisli and his close relatives say they have been subject to intimidation by the authorities following the publication in a Russian periodical of his controversial novella calling for friendship between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. This included a public threat by a pro-government politician to pay to disfigure Aylisli. Aylisli's son and wife have been dismissed from their jobs in the government sector.

In a latest worrisome move on 14 February 2013, the authorities established a commission to handle complaints about "ethical violations" and hacker attacks on websites, under the government-affiliated National Press Council. NGO monitors fear that under current conditions, establishing an internet regulatory body will be a significant step towards stifling freedom of expression online. They also fear that the plan announced in January by National Television and Radio Council head Nushirevan Maharramli to regulate internet TV channels through licensing arrangements will further censor the internet, effectively closing the one remaining open space for freedom of expression in the country.

The current concerted crackdown takes place ahead of presidential elections scheduled for October this year. In the intervening period it is vital that the international community hold Azerbaijan to the commitments it has taken before the Council of Europe, UN and in its partnership with the European Union to uphold freedom of expression and association.

Given the number of initiatives aimed at gaining international prestige, including a recent Internet Governance Forum, it is all the more important that the international community articulates clearly its expectations of Baku. In advance of a Davos 'retreat' of leaders of the World Economic Forum to Baku in April, the international community should reiterate its calls for dropping of all charges against Ilgar Mammadov, Tofiq Yaqubli and Avaz Zeynalli, relating to their exercise of their basic rights including freedom of expression, and call on the authorities to desist from targeting those who exercise their rights to freedom of expression and assembly through penning alternative views, or protesting peacefully.

Signed by members of the IPGA and the Civic Solidarity Platform:



Analytical Center for Interethnic Cooperation and Consultations



ARTICLE 19



Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)



Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights (Russia)



Center for National and International Studies



"Citizen. Army. Law" (Russia)



Crude Accountability **CRUDE ACCOUNTABILITY**

Freedom Files (Russia) **Freedom Files**



Freedom Now **FREEDOM NOW**

Helsinki Citizens' Assembly – Vanadzor (Armenia)



Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Poland)



Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan



Human Rights Club



The Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF)



Human Rights Monitoring Institute



Index on Censorship



Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (Azerbaijan)



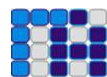
International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR)



Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law



Kharkiv Regional Foundation "Public Alternative"



Media Diversity Institute



Media Legal Defence Initiative



Media Rights Institute



Moscow Helsinki Group



Norwegian Helsinki Committee



Nota Bene (Tajikistan)



Open Society Foundations



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