



H.R.H. Crown Prince Haakon

The Royal Palace

0010 Oslo

Oslo, 18 May 2011

Subject: Plans for the visit of H.R.H. Crown Prince to Azerbaijan in June 2011.

Your Royal Highness,

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Rafto Foundation and the Human Rights House Foundation appeal to the Crown Prince to abstain from participation in the opening ceremony of the *Caspian Oil & Gas 2011*, the 18th International Caspian Oil & Gas Exhibition and Conference Incorporating Refining & Petrochemicals, planned to take place on 6th -7th of June in Baku, Azerbaijan. His Royal Highness's participation could communicate the signals, which can be abused by Azerbaijan, one of the few remaining authoritarian regimes in Europe.

The president of this ex-Soviet republic in Southern-Caucasus, Ilham Aliyev, received his title of president from his father in 2003. He succeeded in preserving his power by means of massive corruption and manipulation of the elections, as well as harassment, imprisonment and extensive use of violence against the people, who raise critical voices against his regime.

Azerbaijan's lack of democracy and serious infringements of human rights are well known to the human rights organizations and international human rights surveillance mechanisms. Human Rights House Foundation and the Norwegian Helsinki Committee have followed closely the developments in the region for the last 15 years, and registered aggravation of the human rights situation under the sitting president, Ilham Aliyev. The Rafto Foundation has also watched anxiously the recent developments in the country, after the Rafto Prize for human rights was awarded to Malahat Nasibova from Azerbaijan in 2009.

Azerbaijan's authorities have further tightened the grip around civil society representatives during the latest months, following unrest and spectacular mobilization of citizens in the Middle East and North Africa. The demonstrations at home were crushed, young activists and representatives of political opposition arrested for speaking up their mind and expressing their opinion publically, especially through the means of social media. Presently,

several cases are pending in the courts, and a large number of the accused run the risk of lengthy prison sentences. Also the lawyers, who try to defend Azerbaijani activists, fall victims to harassment. As the possibility to openly express their protest is already taken away from the ordinary people, this spring, the authorities went one step further when public meeting points and organizations were forced to close down. Among the places which were shut down is the Human Rights House in Baku, an organization receiving financial support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Norway has already expressed its concern with the closures of non-governmental organizations and arrests of human rights activists. First, appealing before the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on 14 March 14 2011, and a few days later, on 17 March 17, before the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). OSCE, EU and the Council of Europe have all criticized the latest developments in Azerbaijan. On 21 March 21, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Thorbjørn Jagland, expressed in an unusual and personal letter to the President Aliyev his deep concern with the latest developments in the country, pointing to increasing lack of pluralism in the public opinion, abridgement of such rights as the freedom of expression and the freedom of assembly, arrests and imprisonment of a number of young activists and politicians from oppositional parties.

The most well-known political prisoner in Azerbaijan today is the newspaper editor Eynullah Fattullayev. He is still serving his sentence in prison, notwithstanding the fact that the European Court of Human Rights has ordered the release already in April 2010, recognizing that the authorities have violated his rights and restricted freedom of expression by imprisoning him. Instead of releasing Fattullayev, Azeri authorities have charged him with illegal possession of drugs and the editor was convicted to more years in prison. This was widely regarded as a politically motivated decision.

Eynulla Fattulayev was previously well acquainted with abuses of power from his government. In March 2005, his colleague, the editor of the *Monitor* magazine, Elmar Huseynov, was gunned down in his apartment building in the capital Baku. Nobody has so far been charged with this murder, but few doubt, that it was caused by his critical attitude towards authorities and the articles he published on corruption. Elmar Huseynov directed criticism at the high-ranking officials in the country, also those who enjoy ownership of the most of the countries resources, including oil and gas. His wife and little son were given political asylum in Norway.

That the disquieting situation in Azerbaijan is less widely known than for example the comparable human rights situation in Belarus can partially be explained by larger geographical distances, but also by the fact that Azerbaijan is a country of strategic and economic significance in an unstable region.

In this connection, Norway too has a role to play. Being the second largest foreign petroleum company in Azerbaijan, the Norwegian Statoil is a heavy player. Azerbaijan is a country rich in oil resources, with an important Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline running through its territory. The democratic forces often describe oil resources as more a challenge to the country, rather than a blessing. Thus, even though the oil revenues have boosted the state budget in the recent years, most part of the Azerbaijani population are not enjoying the benefits of this economical growth, contrary to what the situation is in Norway. Reluctance

of the western countries to criticize grave human rights violations, that are taking place in Azerbaijan, can be seen as a consequence of having considerable economical and strategic interest in the country's oil industry and stable deliveries to the European markets.

In regard to all of the above, we see it as an unfortunate signal from the Crown Prince, who is one of the founders of the UN Global Dignity Campaign, to provide undeserved recognition to the regime of the President Aliyev, which is the way it is likely his visit to Baku is likely to be perceived. The very fact that the freedom of expression is impaired and there is no possibility for a balanced public debate in Azerbaijan, will give the space for the authorities to present their own version of the reasons for the Crown Prince's visit. The role of the Royal family as a non-political actor limits the Crown prince's opportunity to take part in the public exchange that could clarify the framework for his visit, and his contribution to Norway's cooperation with Azerbaijani authorities. During the last months, we have watched authoritarian regimes succumb under the pressure from the democratic forces. It is clear, that old alliances with authoritative regimes soon can become a burden, which does not serve the best interests of the Royal Family in Norway.

We express hope, that the Crown Prince, after having examined the present situation, chooses to abstain from the visit to Baku.

With deep respect,



Bjørn Engesland
Secretary General
Norwegian Helsinki Committee



Maria Dahle
Office Manager
Human Rights House Foundation



Therese Jebsen
Office Manager
Rafto Foundation

Copy to:

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jonas Gahr Støre

Minister of Petroleum and Energy, Ola Borten Moe

Secretary of State, Espen Barth Eide

