

2 September 2015

**Re: Addressing the deteriorating human rights situation in Azerbaijan
at the 30th Session of the UN Human Rights Council**

Your Excellency,

We, the undersigned international human rights organizations, are writing to express deep concern about the worsening human rights situation in Azerbaijan, and to urge your delegation to support strong attention to the situation by the Human Rights Council through a cross-regional joint statement, regular reporting by the High Commissioner and ultimately a resolution if the situation does not improve.

We welcome the joint statement delivered under agenda item 4 during the 29th session of the UN Human Rights Council, condemning the ongoing crackdown in the Republic of Azerbaijan. This statement, led by Ireland on behalf of a group of 25 States, unambiguously raised concern about the “shrinking of space for civil society and freedom of expression in Azerbaijan,” underlined the “systematic silencing of critical voices” in the country, and called for “the immediate and unconditional release of journalists, human rights defenders, and activists wrongfully imprisoned on politically motivated charges.”

Notwithstanding this substantial expression of international concern, however, the human rights situation in Azerbaijan has continued to deteriorate:

- On September 1, the Baku Court of Grave Crimes sentenced award-winning investigative journalist **Khadija Ismayilova**, to 7.5 years in prison, on politically-motivated charges of embezzlement, illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion, and abuse of power. Khadija Ismayilova, one of Azerbaijan’s leading independent journalists, has been jailed since December 2014, and is one of the few journalists in Azerbaijan willing to investigate controversial topics, such as corruption and business interests of senior government officials.
- The ailing human rights activists **Leyla and Arif Yunus** were convicted to 8.5 and 7 years, respectively, on 13 August 2015, on spurious charges of fraud, illegal entrepreneurship and tax evasion, related to their human rights work. In addition to the sentences, the court requested confiscation of their property and bank accounts and the immediate transfer of that property to the State.
- On 9 August 2015, journalist **Rasim Aliyev** died in a Baku hospital after he was severely beaten on 8 August by a group of unknown people. Rasim Aliyev was a freelance journalist, chairman of the Institute for Reporters Freedom and Safety (IRFS), Azerbaijan’s leading media freedom organization, and was an outspoken critic of the government. He had faced violence and threats in the past in retaliation for his work, including being beaten by police in a 2013 incident that was captured in a widely circulated photograph. Rasim Aliyev took over the chairmanship of IRFS after chairman **Emin Huseynov** went into hiding on 8 August 2014 out of fear for his safety. Huseynov left Azerbaijan in June 2015.
- In June, another Azerbaijani journalist, Berlin-based Meydan TV Director **Emin Milli**, reported receiving a threat from a high-level government official, which was shortly followed by pressure against many of his relatives living in Azerbaijan.

- On 31 July, the Baku Court of Appeals confirmed the sentence of human rights defender **Rasul Jafarov**, thus sentencing him to 6 years and 3 months imprisonment.
- On 21 July, the Baku Court of Appeals upheld the 22 April decision of the Court of Grave Crimes in the case of award-winning human rights lawyer **Intigam Aliyev**, leaving him with a sentence of 7.5 years imprisonment.
- During the June 2015 European Games held in Baku, several international media outlets, freelance journalists and independent human rights organizations were banned from entering the country or denied accreditation to cover the Games. As the Games ended on 28 June 2015, **four Azerbaijan-based journalists** working for the independent internet-based Meydan TV were prevented from leaving the country.

These incidents illustrate a pattern of persecution of human rights defenders, journalists and lawyers, harsh sentences following hasty, unfair trials marred by procedural irregularities, including lack of access to interpreters, lack of access to investigation materials, arbitrary denial of defense motions, seemingly arbitrary denial of defense motions, and restrictions and denial of access to independent observers and journalists.

On August 20, 2015, six UN Special Rapporteurs issued a joint statement¹ condemning the conviction of Leyla and Arif Yunus as “manifestly politically motivated,” in a trial that “fell short of international norms and standards.” They described the convictions as “representative of the continuing repression of independent civil society in Azerbaijan” and reiterated a call that the authorities “reverse the trend of repression, criminalization and prosecution of human rights work in the country.”

We further express deep concern at the severe deterioration of the health conditions of Intigam Aliyev, Leyla Yunus and Arif Yunus, who require urgent medical attention, and should be immediately released on humanitarian grounds, together with all those facing politically-motivated charges or sentences.

National mechanisms that could address violations of civil society members' and organizations' rights in Azerbaijan have been severely curtailed. With few remaining opportunities available for public expression in the country, we call upon the UN Human Rights Council to urge Azerbaijan to end the ongoing deterioration of the human rights situation in the country.

We therefore urge your delegation to reiterate the concerns of these and other international bodies through a series of actions, including a cross-regional joint statement at the 30th session of the Human Rights Council, requesting the High Commissioner for Human Rights to report to the Council on the crackdown on civil society in Azerbaijan at the earliest possible occasion, and pursuing a resolution if the government continues to ignore repeated regional and international calls for releases and reform.

Yours sincerely,

Human Rights Watch
International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
Human Rights House Foundation

¹ Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and association, Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression, Special Rapporteur on the independence of the judiciary, Special Rapporteur on the right to health, and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention,
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16337&LangID=E>.