

Press release

Azerbaijan

The crackdown on peaceful demonstrators and civil society must stop

Paris - Baku, March 18, 2011. The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and its member organisation in Azerbaijan the Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan (HRCA) express their deep concern regarding the arrestation of demonstrators and the recent crackdown on civil society.

The Azerbaijanese police rounded up dozens of people who participated in the rallies organised on March 11, the « Great People's day », and March 12 by opposition parties, calling for freedom and the resignation of President Ilham Aliyev.

At least 30 people were detained for disobeying police orders, deferring police or participating in an unauthorised rally, and sentenced to imprisonment for five to eight days. « *Several activists and protest organisers were even arrested prior to the demonstrations. The crackdown on peaceful demonstrators and civil society at large is intolerable and FIDH will closely follow the situation.* », said FIDH president, Souhayr Belhassen.

These events are occurring in a context of increased pressure on civil society. Over the past few weeks, several attempts have been made by the authorities to undermine the activities of civil society. On March 10, the Justice Ministry ordered the Azerbaijan Human Rights House organisation (HRH), an officially registered organisation, to immediately close down on charges of breaching the June 2009 amendments to the Law on Nongovernmental Organisations.¹ Previously, HRH reported on the police's investigation into their activities.

The users of social networks were also targeted by the Azerbaijanese authorities who arrested at least five of them, prior to the demonstrations, for fabricated charges of hooliganism, disobedience to police orders, drug possession and draft evasion. Indeed, they had either used Facebook and other social media outlets to call the youth to protest on March, 11, or used social media to relay calls for mass demonstration organised by political parties on March, 12.

Despite motions made by the lawyers to allow the press and family members in the courtroom, all the trials were held behind closed doors, in contradiction with the Azerbaijanese Criminal Procedures Code. The five defendants were provided with state-appointed lawyers and denied access to the counsel of their choice. In consequence, their hearings were concluded within a short period of time. FIDH

¹ See the urgent appeal of the Observatory for the protection of human rights defenders (FIDH and OMCT programme), <http://www.fidh.org/Closure-of-the-Human-Rights-House-Azerbaijan-AZE>

and HRCA fear that the arrests were politically motivated and aimed at stopping the criticism of the government on social networking sites.

FIDH and HRCA are particularly concerned with the case of Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, a member of the youth movement « Positive Change » who ran for parliament in November of 2010. Between November 2010 and January 2011, he was prevented from leaving Azerbaijan three times. and was arrested a mere two hours after posting a message in support of the March 11 demonstration, calling on the police not to use violence against the demonstrators.

On March 4, Hajiyev was sentenced to one month in prison on charges of draft evasion although he had the right to postpone his military service as he studied in the US and had submitted a claim to do an alternative civil service. In a letter to his lawyer, he claimed that he had been tortured, insulted and threatened with rape by a senior police official while in custody. Despite his continuous requests, he did not receive any medical assistance and started a dry hunger strike to protest against his detention and the ill-treatment he received. His lawyer, Elchin Namazov, filed a complaint with the Ganja prosecutor's office requesting an investigation into the ill-treatments against M. Hajiyev.

FIDH and HRCA condemn the arrests, detentions, harassment and ill-treatment of members of the opposition, activists and citizens who peacefully demonstrated in Baku and call on the Azerbaijane authorities to immediately:

Release, without further delay, all individuals convicted for political reasons, who are imprisoned or serving other forms of punishment;

- Put an end to the persecution, arbitrary arrest or harassment of citizens for political reasons;
- take effective steps to investigate any cases of illegal arrests during the crackdown on the peaceful demonstrators ;
- Launch a thorough and impartial investigation on the allegations of torture and ill-treatment of Bakhtiyar Hajiyev;
- Repeal the order of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Azerbaijan issued on March 10, 2011 on the closure of the Azerbaijan Human Rights House ;
- Ensure in all circumstances respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of assembly, of expression and of human rights defenders, in accordance with international human rights standards and international instruments ratified by Azerbaijan.

Press contacts:

Karine Appy/Arthur Manet : + 33 1 43 55 14 12 / + 33 1 43 55 90 19