



Statement: On International Human Rights Day, Situation in Azerbaijan Worse Than Ever Before

Baku, 10 December 2013. On International Human Rights Day, the Human Rights Club (HRC) reiterates its deep concern regarding continued widespread and systemic human rights violations in Azerbaijan. As a result of an unprecedented crackdown on fundamental freedoms, there are now 143 political prisoners in the country. The HRC calls on the Azerbaijani government to take immediate, concrete steps to improve the situation, including releasing all political prisoners. The HRC also calls on the international community to take action to hold the Azerbaijani government accountable for its human rights obligations.

This year, in the run-up to and aftermath of Azerbaijan's October presidential election, the authorities have engaged in an unprecedented crackdown to silence all voices of criticism and dissent. The fundamental rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association have been particularly under attack. The current state of human rights in the country is alarming.

As a result of this ongoing crackdown, there are now 143 cases of political prisoners in Azerbaijan. These include journalists, bloggers, human rights defenders, civic and political activists, religious followers, and ordinary citizens, who have been detained or imprisoned for political reasons, many in connection with exercising their fundamental freedoms.

The climate for NGOs is especially worrisome, as the country's few remaining critical NGOs have been increasingly under attack. A series of regressive legislation has been adopted, limiting the ability of NGOs to accept donations, restricting their operations, and making it easy for the authorities to shut down undesired groups. Registration of NGOs remains politicized, with an estimated 1,000 NGOs unable to register with the state, including the HRC. Parliament is now considering draft amendments that would make it more difficult for foreign NGOs to register and operate in Azerbaijan.

The HRC notes particular concern over the ongoing pressure against the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center (EMDC), Azerbaijan's largest and most experienced domestic monitoring organization. EMDC is being criminally investigated in connection with its funding from foreign donors, a move that has troubling implications for other democracy and human rights NGOs.

Freedom of assembly has also been under attack. The authorities continue to require advanced permission for demonstrations, and restrict venues to generally remote and unsuitable locations. They respond to unsanctioned protests harshly, using disproportionate force to disperse peaceful protesters and arresting scores of protest organizers and participants. Amendments to the freedom of assembly law sharply increased the fines for organizing or participating in unsanctioned protests, and amendments to the Administrative Code extended the maximum period of detention for such actions to 60 days.

The HRC calls on the Azerbaijani government to take concrete steps to improve the human rights situation in the country as a matter of urgent priority, including immediately and unconditionally releasing all political prisoners and ceasing politically motivated arrests.

The HRC further calls on the international community to take immediate action to hold the Azerbaijani government accountable for its international human rights obligations. In particular, the Council of Europe must demand reforms as Azerbaijan is set to take on a position of leadership, as Chairman of the Committee of Ministers from May to November 2014. The European Union must also bring human rights to the forefront of its negotiations with Azerbaijan, in light of recently strengthened relations through the signing of a Visa Facilitation Agreement and a Mobility Partnership.

Notes:

- One year ago today, the HRC launched the Art for Democracy campaign, which uses art to promote democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan. Art for Democracy is currently running a fundraising campaign through the crowdfunding website Indiegogo, which ends on 23 December. Please consider making a donation to support our work: <http://igg.me/at/artfordemocracy>
- To mark International Human Rights Day, the HRC will be participating in a Human Rights Fair in Baku. Details can be found here: <http://www.irfs.org/news-feed/invitation-to-human-rights-fair/>
- Also in honor of International Human Rights Day, Art for Democracy will be hosting a photo exhibit at the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London, in partnership with Index on Censorship and Platform. The work of alternative Azerbaijani photographers will be featured, capturing the real situation in the country. Details can be found here: <http://us4.campaign-archive1.com/?u=2b0c4fe83c1a2114311563b13&id=0ec293c560>
- To arrange an interview, or for any enquiries, please contact HRC Chairman Rasul Jafarov via artfordemocracy@gmail.com or +994 50 586 3537.