

Amnesty International Holds Campaign in Support of Freedom of Speech in Azerbaijan

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This action, part of the organization's solidarity campaign with independent journalists and human rights activists in Azerbaijan, comes as the country's parliament (Milli Mejlis) prepares to discuss on Tuesday, June 30, legislative changes affecting the registration and financing of independent media and civil society.

If adopted, they will increase the government's control and scrutiny of the activities of journalists and human rights activists and will undermine their ability to monitor abuses and hold the authorities to account. They could also limit the access to the country for representatives of international human rights organizations.

Emin Huseynov, head of the country's media watchdog Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) said that if voted through by parliament, the legislative changes would pave the way for the closure of independent media and organizations that stand for freedom of expression.

"The introduction of restrictive legislation and the banning of foreign radio broadcasters are some of the methods that the authorities in Azerbaijan are using to muzzle the media there," said Nicola Duckworth, Amnesty International's Europe and Central Asia program director.

"Independent journalists are being intimidated, arrested and sent to prison after unfair trials. Attacks on and even murder of independent journalists remain unresolved."

"A society without an independent media and civil society is a voiceless society. Its members are easy prey for human rights violations," Duckworth said.

Amnesty International has compiled a list of cases illustrative of the range of human rights abuses that journalists in Azerbaijan have been subjected to in recent months.

"President Ilham Aliyev has declared that the state should protect the rights of all journalists. It is high time that the authorities of Azerbaijan match their words as well as international obligations with deeds," Duckworth said.

As the urgent first step, Amnesty International calls upon the Milli Mejlis not to pass any amendments that could be used in effect to prevent the legitimate activities of media and civil society organizations. The country should bring its existing legislation and practice into line with the government's international obligations.

Cases

Emin Huseynov, head of the IRFS, has been allegedly beaten up by the police on several occasions.

Aqil Xalil from Azadliq newspaper was stabbed in the chest and later physically attacked again in 2008, but though the authorities claimed they had found a perpetrator, Aqil Xalil and Azerbaijani human rights organizations believe that the true assailants have escaped justice.

Elmar Huseynov, editor-in-chief of the newspaper Monitor, was shot dead in 2005. Four years on, no one has been brought to justice.

Qanimat Zahid and Eynulla Fatullayev are in prison after unfair trials for their peaceful journalistic work. Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience and calls for their immediate and unconditional release.

Journalists in Naxcivan, an autonomous Azerbaijani exclave situated between Armenia, Iran and Turkey, have also been repressed for trying to report alleged abuses of power by local officials.

Amnesty International is a Nobel Peace Prize-winning grassroots activist organization with more than 2.2 million supporters, activists and volunteers in more than 150 countries campaigning for human rights worldwide. The organization investigates and exposes abuses, educates and mobilizes the public, and works to protect people wherever justice, freedom, truth and dignity are denied.

For more information, please visit: www.amnestyusa.org (Amnesty International).