

## Azerbaijani Police Fires Rubber Bullets, Tear Gas at Protesting Small Business Owners

BAKU. January 19, 2013. Azerbaijani police fired rubber bullets and tear gas and used truncheons today against protesting small business owner at "Bina" shopping center in capital Baku's suburbs, according to local media reports. Over thousand shopkeepers blocked the highway that links Baku to coastal cities and staged a protest. Another 5,000 shop owners also have kept their businesses shut today in a sign of solidarity with the protesters.

Some protesters threw stones in retaliation to the police attacks and clashes erupted between the business owners and the police. Protesters managed to hold for about few hours, before being dispersed by the police. Both protesters and police were reported to sustain injuries and about 15-25 protesters were detained according to different reports. Local media and social websites also informed about the detained protesters being severely beaten by the police.

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The shopkeepers were voicing their objections against rent increases for conducting business at the shopping center and against a new law that requires them to install cash registers at their small shops. The protesters told to the media that they had to pay ever increasing sums for being allowed to conduct their business at the center.

"Bina" shopping center is one of the largest in the country, housing thousands of small shops trading all kinds of consumer goods. The ownership of the shopping center is being tracked by local observers to the head of presidential administration Ramiz Mehdiyev, who is directly implicated in the ongoing scandal over sale of parliamentary seats in exchange for large bribes and the death of a key witness, which is unraveling on the hidden cam videos being released online.

Smaller actions by business owners had taken place at the shopping centers in Azerbaijan before, but the Bina protest today was the biggest and most violent confrontation by business owners and the authorities.

Indicating increasing tensions between the the Aliyev regime and the broader society, today's events came at the hills of last week's large demonstration in downtown Baku organized by youth groups using social media to call for protests against abuse and deaths of conscripts in the national army. (Azeri Report, RFE/RL)