



JOINT STATEMENT

Anniversary of human rights defender's arrest marks one year of unprecedented repression in Azerbaijan

A year after the Azerbaijani government launched an unprecedented crackdown on human rights, the situation in the country continues to deteriorate. The Sport for Rights Coalition calls on the international community to immediately and publicly condemn the government of Azerbaijan's actions and take concrete steps to support Azerbaijani civil society.

One year ago, on 30 July 2014, Azerbaijani human rights defender **Leyla Yunus** was arrested and charged with treason, fraud, forgery, tax evasion, and illegal entrepreneurship. Yunus, the Director of the Institute of Peace and Democracy, was a tireless rights advocate, likely targeted for her work on behalf of Azerbaijan's many political prisoners, and her call for a boycott of the inaugural European Games, which took place in Baku in June 2015.

Yunus's arrest marked the start of a period of unprecedented repression in Azerbaijan. The human rights situation in the country has now reached alarming lows as the authorities aggressively pursue the very individuals who worked to defend those already targeted for expressing critical opinions.

On 2 August 2014, human rights defender and founder of the Sport for Rights campaign **Rasul Jafarov** was arrested on charges of illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion, and abuse of power. On 5 August 2014, Leyla Yunus's husband **Arif Yunus**, a historian and activist in his own right, was arrested, followed by human rights lawyer **Intigam Aliyev** on 8 August 2014, on similar charges.

Also on 8 August 2014, authorities searched and closed the office of Azerbaijan's leading press freedom organisation, the **Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety** (IRFS), as part of a wider criminal investigation into a large group of NGOs working on issues related to democracy and human rights. IRFS Chairman **Emin Huseynov** sought refuge in the Swiss Embassy in Baku, where he remained for 10 months, fearing arrest. On 12 June, Huseynov flew out of Azerbaijan on the plane of Swiss Foreign Minister Didier Burkhalter, who attended the opening ceremony of the European Games in Baku.

For many years now, the Azerbaijani authorities have employed a range of tactics to silence critical voices, from physical attacks and torture to blackmail and imprisonment. In Huseynov's case, however, they introduced an outrageous new tactic. In an unprecedented step, in violation of international and

Azerbaijani law, the government stripped Huseynov of his Azerbaijani citizenship. He has become a stateless person, left with no choice but to apply for asylum in Switzerland.

Many other human rights defenders and journalists have fled Azerbaijan out of fear for their safety. The Sport for Rights coalition fears that without widespread international condemnation, the same tactic could be applied to others, with the nationality of “unwelcome” activists renounced.

“The international community must keep its focus on Azerbaijan as the worst for the bravest, independent-minded individuals – both the ones remaining on the ground and those forced into exile – may be yet to come”, CPJ Europe and Central Asia Program Coordinator Nina Ognianova said. “The Azerbaijani regime is known for punishing its critics in the aftermath of the global mega events it has hosted, and the illegal, retaliatory renouncing of Emin Huseynov’s citizenship is an illustration of that. So is the harassment of the few remaining independent journalists in the country and the intimidation of the families of those pushed into exile”.

In a renewed assault against civil society, the Azerbaijani authorities have increasingly been targeting the family members of exiled activists. **Ganimat Zahid**, the editor-in-chief of *Azadliq* newspaper who has been in political exile since being forced to flee Azerbaijan in 2011, has seen the persecution of family members who remain in the country. His cousin and two nephews were arrested on charges varying from “refusing to comply with police instructions” to drug possession. Most recently, on 23 July, the authorities arrested the brother-in-law of **Emin Milli** – the Director of Meydan TV and a whistleblower in political exile – on similar drug charges. He faces up to 12 years in jail if convicted.

“This is a clear and worrying escalation of the Azerbaijani authorities’ crackdown on free expression”, said ARTICLE 19 Executive Director Thomas Hughes. “When those reporting the truth do not bend to intimidation, the authorities start detaining their family members and loved ones as a way to silence criticism entirely. This is a completely unacceptable attack on human rights in general, and specifically on free speech”.

Now, as international media attention has shifted from the country following the European Games, the broader human rights crackdown continues. The jailed Azerbaijani rights defenders are facing show trials marred by irregularity and due process violations, carried out by a judiciary that completely lacks independence. Although the charges against these rights defenders are spurious and politically motivated, they have no hope of fair and impartial trials.

On 15 July, a preparatory hearing was held in the case of **Leyla and Arif Yunus**, with the substantive portion starting on 27 July. After nearly a year of pre-trial detention, Leyla Yunus appeared ill and fatigued, and was kept in an isolated glass cage during the hearing. It was also the first time she has seen her husband Arif after many months of separation in different detention facilities.

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 in jail to finish his 7.5-year sentence. Aliyev was one of the few lawyers in Azerbaijan willing to take on human rights cases. He has filed hundreds of cases with the European Court of Human Rights, and had more than a dozen cases pending hearing at the time of his arrest.

"Intiqam Aliyev, the 2012 laureate of People in Need's Homo Homini Award, is one of the bravest and most honest lawyers in the region, and has been punished solely for his human rights work. His continued imprisonment, following a sham trial, is a sad reminder that Azerbaijan's justice system is broken and completely dependent on the political will of the government", said Ivana Skalova, head of the East European Programme at the Prague-based NGO People in Need.

On 24 July, a preparatory hearing took place in the case of award-winning investigative journalist **Khadija Ismayilova**, jailed since December 2014 on charges of inciting someone to attempt suicide, with more serious charges later added of embezzlement, illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion, and abuse of power. Ismayilova was one of the few journalists in Azerbaijan willing to cover risky topics such as corruption of the ruling elite.

"We condemn the ongoing imprisonment of Khadija, who has spent nearly eight months in detention as authorities attempt to suppress the most vibrant voices reporting from Azerbaijan", said Karin Karlekar, director of Free Expression Programs at PEN American Center. "The charges against her are clearly fabricated, and we urge the government to respect the right to freedom of expression and allow her and other independent journalists to do their jobs freely".

On 31 July, **Rasul Jafarov** will appeal the 16 April decision of the Court of Grave Crimes, sentencing him to 6.5 years in jail. He is also prohibited from holding any office for three years. During the first-instance trial, all of the prosecution's witnesses testified in his favour, and the prosecution failed to prove his guilt. After the verdict, Jafarov reiterated that the charges against him were fabricated and politically motivated.

As Chairman of the Human Rights Club and founder of the Sing for Democracy, Art for Democracy, and Sport for Rights campaigns, Jafarov worked to defend the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association. Just prior to his arrest in August 2014, he had published information on more than 100 cases of political prisoners in Azerbaijan.

As members of the Sport for Rights coalition, we urge the Azerbaijani authorities to cease this crackdown and take concrete steps to improve the human rights situation in the country. We reiterate our call for the immediate and unconditional release of Leyla and Arif Yunus, Rasul Jafarov, Intigam Aliyev, and Khadija Ismayilova, along with the other jailed journalists and human rights defenders. We further express deep concern at the severe deterioration in health

of Leyla and Arif Yunus, who require urgent medical attention and should be immediately released on humanitarian, if not political grounds.

We also urge the international community to sustain attention to Azerbaijan in the coming months, as the few critical voices left in the country are at elevated risk in the aftermath of the European Games and in the run-up to the November parliamentary elections. Immediate and concrete action is needed to protect and support these individuals and to hold Azerbaijan accountable for its international human rights obligations.

Supporting organisations:

- 89up
- ARTICLE 19
- Committee to Protect Journalists
- Index on Censorship
- International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
- International Media Support
- Pen American Centre
- People in Need
- Platform
- Solidarity with Belarus Information Office
- World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders