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Europe & ex-USSR - Azerbaijan

Escalation

Stepping up harassment of media, Nakhchivan expels Azerbaijani reporter

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Reporters Without Borders is appalled by the unacceptable escalation in harassment of the media by the authorities in Nakhchivan, an autonomous Azerbaijani exclave between Armenia and Iran, especially last week's expulsion of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty reporter **Yafez Hasanov** (Яфез Хасанов).

Hasanov was abducted on 31 August by three unidentified men in plain-clothes using the kind of car that government security officials normally drive. They drove him to the Iranian border and told him to return to the Azerbaijani capital of Baku via Iran. If he set foot in Nakhchivan during the next month, "it will cost you," they told him.

"After death threats and intimidation, Nakhchivan's authorities are displaying exceptional inventiveness in expanding their already complete repressive arsenal against the media," Reporters Without Borders said.

"Their latest invention, deporting a journalist from his own country to one that criminalizes journalism, shows a complete contempt for legal appearances and a feeling of complete impunity. How far will they have to go before the central government and the international community decide to do something to halt this escalation?"

Hasanov had gone to the Julfa district of Nakhchivan to investigate Turac Zeynalov's death in detention, a story that the local authorities are trying at all costs to suppress because it exposes the cruelty of the methods they use. Hasanov's abductors told him not to meddle, took his passport and returned it with an exit stamp when they reached the border. Once inside Iran, Hasanov managed to return to Baku by taxi the next day. This entailed a degree of risk as RFE/RL has been classified as an "illegal organization" by the Iranian authorities.

Malahat Nasibova (Малахат Насибова), a Nakhchivan-based reporter for the independent news agency Turan, has meanwhile been subjected to intense pressure since receiving a summons from the Ministry of National Security (MNS) for trying to interview members of the Zeynalov family.

She and her husband have received death threats by telephone and SMS in recent days. After she reported that an MNS official had called her an "enemy of the people," the official's mother threatened her yesterday outside her home. "Who are you to quote my son's name on the Internet," the woman said. "You will see what I can do to you. You can do nothing against us. The MNS supports us."

At a news conference on 2 September, Nasibova described the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic as a "laboratory of repression" for the rest of the country. "The repressive methods tested in Nakhchivan are then applied on a larger scale throughout Azerbaijan," she said. "It was in Nakhchivan that demonstrators were first confined to a psychiatric hospital. It was in Nakhchivan that journalists were kidnapped for the first time."

There was no comment from the government in Baku in response to her comments about human rights violations in this remote province. The deafening silence makes an international reaction all the more urgent, so that violations of this kind do not spread to the rest of the

country.

Reporters Without Borders joins Nasibova and other journalists and human rights activists in urging the national media and foreign embassy personnel to go to Nakhchivan in order to shed light on these unacceptable practices.
