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PRESS RELEASE

**Azerbaijan: ARTICLE 19 Condemns Conviction of Journalists for Defamation**

**Two senior journalists were found guilty and sentenced to prison on defamation charges in a Baku district court on 22 July 2009. ARTICLE 19 condemns the conviction of Faramaz Novruzoglu and Sardar Alibeyli, editor-in-chief and deputy editor of *Nota* newspaper, and calls upon the Government of Azerbaijan to repeal all provisions relating to defamation from the Criminal Code.**

Novruzoglu (also known as Faramaz Allahverdiyev) and Alibeyli were convicted under Articles 148 and 147.2 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code and each was sentenced to three months' imprisonment. Another *Nota* journalist, Ramiz Tagiyev, was also sentenced to six months' conditional imprisonment.

Novruzoglu and Alibeyli have both faced previous convictions for defamation. Just two days before, on 20 July, Alibeyli received another seven-month conditional sentence on defamation charges. In January 2007, both journalists were convicted on defamation charges as the result of a lawsuit filed by the Minister of Internal Affairs. Alibeyli received a sentence of 18 months of "reformatory works" and Novruzoglu was sentenced to two years' imprisonment; he was released almost a year later after a presidential pardon.

*"It is deeply ironic that these latest convictions occurred on 22 July – Azerbaijan's National Press Day,"* comments ARTICLE 19 Executive Director, Dr Agnès Callamard. The events also take place amidst an international outcry about the continued detention of two Azerbaijani bloggers on spurious charges, and just one day after the UN Human Rights Committee examined Azerbaijan's implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including those related to the country's freedom of expression commitments.

ARTICLE 19 believes that the current provisions on defamation and insult in the Criminal Code, along with the Government's unremitting implementation of these provisions, represent a serious impediment to freedom of expression in Azerbaijan.

ARTICLE 19, together with other international organisations such as the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, have repeatedly urged the Government to abolish criminal defamation. Just this week, on 21 July, UN Human Rights Committee experts stated that libel and slander should be civil, rather than criminal, offenses. These latest convictions highlight once more the need for defamation to be decriminalised in Azerbaijan

*“Such enforcement of criminal defamation provisions has a chilling effect on the work of journalists and other media workers, who may engage in self-censorship out of fear of prosecution”, says Callamard. “These sorts of criminal defamation provisions send the wrong message about the country’s commitment to human rights and freedom of expression, and we call on the Government of Azerbaijan to eliminate them from the law”.*

#### **NOTES TO EDITORS:**

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- For a full analysis of Azerbaijan’s defamation laws, please see ARTICLE 19’s *Memorandum on Laws of the Republic of Azerbaijan Relating to the Protection of Reputation*, available at <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/analysis/azerbaijan-defamation-2004.pdf>.
- For more detailed information about the UN Human Rights Committee’s review of Azerbaijan’s implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, go to:  
[http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news\\_media.nsf/\(httpNewsByYear\\_en\)/E5775263F214EA6EC12575FA0037210B?OpenDocument](http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/(httpNewsByYear_en)/E5775263F214EA6EC12575FA0037210B?OpenDocument)
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.