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Europe/Ex-USSR - Azerbaijan

Civil liberties flouted

Leading journalists and activists arrested at protest, mistreated

29 January 2013

Reporters Without Borders is outraged by the arrest of many leading journalists and netizens during a demonstration in Baku on 26 January, and the mistreatment to which they were subjected before being released.

"There seems to be no limit to the [Aliyev](#) regime's contempt for fundamental freedoms," Reporters Without Borders Christophe Deloire said.

"The brutal treatment of leading figures in the fight for human rights and freedom of information was unacceptable and was clearly an act of personal revenge designed to teach a lesson. The authorities are trying to suppress and deter criticism by silencing those who often condemn the woeful human rights situation.

"Coming just days after the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe rejected a resolution on Azerbaijan's political prisoners, this new blow to the country's civil society shows that the authorities think they can act with complete impunity.

"The international community must urgently come to its senses and make the Azerbaijani government understand that such behaviour is incompatible with its membership of the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and its association with the European Union."

Around 100 demonstrators were detained when the security forces dispersed the 26 January demonstration in Baku, which had been called to protest against the violent crackdown on a riot a few days earlier in Ismailly, 200 km west of the capital.

As well as members of such opposition groups as the Popular Front, Musavat and NIDA, those detained included well-known journalists such as [Khadija Ismayilova](#) and **Shahveled Chobanoglu**, leading bloggers such as [Emin Milli](#), [Zaur Gurbanli](#) and [Bakhtiyar Hajiyev](#), and two journalists and human rights activists from the isolated region of Nakhchivan, [Malahat Nasibova and Ilgar Nasibov](#). **Mursel Aliyev**, the head of the [Telebe.az](#) news website, and **Zaur Rasulzadeh**, a reporter for the [1News.az](#) news portal, were also arrested.

Wearing press vests or showing press cards did not spare other journalists, who were there to cover the event, from being the victims of violence by plain-clothes policemen.

The police continued to act with brutality after the protest was dispersed, discharging tear-gas inside a truck that was taking about 30 detainees, including Nasibova and Nasibov, to a police station. Because the windows were closed, many people felt ill, including the driver, who caused an accident.

An ambulance had to be summoned to police station No. 37 in the district of Khatai, where detainees were held for four hours. Other demonstrators were taken to police stations in the districts of Nasimi and Sabail.

Most were released with a verbal warning. But some of the best-known detainees were punished under a new law on illegal demonstrations that is based on [Russian legislation](#). Milli was sentenced to 15 days in prison, along with three opposition activists. Hajiyev was fined 600 manats (570 euros) while Ismayilova was fined 400 manats (380 euros).

While the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe was in session last week in Strasbourg, a number of journalists and activists attended it to draw attention to the violation of civil liberties in Azerbaijan.

The session ended on 23 January with the adoption of a resolution on the human rights situation in Azerbaijan but the assembly rejected a specific resolution on Azerbaijan's political prisoners.

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(Picture: AFP / Tofik Babayev)

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