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## PRESS RELEASE

### Azerbaijan: Free Expression Under Attack

**London 22.10.10:** Ahead of Azerbaijan's upcoming Parliamentary elections, nine organisations are launching a new report titled *Free Expression under Attack: Azerbaijan's Deteriorating Media Environment*. The report findings come out of a joint freedom of expression mission to the country in September 2010 and highlight the Azerbaijani government's failure to comply with its international commitments to promote and protect freedom of expression.

*"In Azerbaijan, those who attack or harass journalists do so in the knowledge that they will not be punished for their crimes. The fact that the authorities fail to conduct effective investigations into these crimes contributes significantly to the current climate of fear and vulnerability,"* said Agnès Callamard, Executive Director, ARTICLE 19.

The deteriorating freedom of expression situation in the country is the result of a number of worrisome trends, including the continuing practice of imprisoning journalists and bloggers in connection with expressing critical opinions; the enduring cycle of violence against journalists and impunity for those who commit these acts; and the continued existence of criminal defamation provisions in domestic law. These trends are particularly concerning in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections, set to take place on 7 November 2010.

*"There are few - if any - signs of the emergence of a free press, a fundamental cornerstone of any democratic society,"* said Rodrigo Bonilla, Missions Coordinator, World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA). *"In its place, there is a handful of independent media trying to survive in a pervasive climate of intimidation and fear, financially crippled and with insignificant audiences. Drastic reforms are urgently needed,"* continued Bonilla.

One editor who spoke with the mission reported that he had lost track of the number of times he had been threatened or attacked. Another journalist said "the life of every citizen or

journalist who wants freedom is under constant threat.” In the regions outside of the capital, the situation for journalists is even worse. They face violence and threats regularly and most instances go unreported.

*“Efforts to build a credible and professional journalistic environment are systematically undermined by political interference and control in the media, shocking employment conditions, and a fundamental lack of respect for the role of independent journalism in a democratic society,”* said Oliver Money-Kyrle, Assistant General Secretary, International Federation of Journalists.

The report also contains the mission’s recommendations to the Azerbaijani authorities on concrete steps to improve the freedom of expression climate in the country, including by investigating and prosecuting all acts of violence against journalists; immediately and unconditionally releasing the currently imprisoned journalists and bloggers; and decriminalising defamation.

*“The Government, in cooperation with international organisations, intergovernmental structures, and local media and civil society groups, should take immediate steps to support the independent media, end the climate of self-censorship, and help foster dialogue,”* said Rovshan Bagirov, Freedom of Expression/Media Program Director, Open Society Institute-Assistance Foundation/Azerbaijan.

The report is the result of joint freedom of expression mission undertaken from 7 to 9 September, 2010. The mission representatives met with journalists and other media workers, collected testimonies from survivors of violent attacks, and family members of imprisoned journalists, and held meetings with civil society activists and government representatives.

The nine organisations that participated in the joint mission are members of the International Partnership Group for Azerbaijan, and actively work towards the promotion and protection of human rights. The participating organisations included: ARTICLE 19; Freedom House; Index on Censorship; International Federation of Journalists; Media Diversity Institute; Open Society Foundations; Press Now; Reporters Without Borders; and World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers.

**ENDS**

**NOTES TO EDITORS:**

- To arrange a media interview with mission spokespersons, please contact Mona Samari at [mona@article19.org](mailto:mona@article19.org) or +44 (0) 7515 828 939.
- The full text of *Free Expression under Attack: Azerbaijan’s Deteriorating Media Environment* is available at:  
[www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/free-expression-under-attack.pdf](http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/free-expression-under-attack.pdf)

**SPOKESPERSONS AVAILABLE FOR MEDIA INTERVIEWS:**

- ARTICLE 19 – Agnès Callamard
- Freedom House – Courtney C. Radsch
- Index on Censorship - Natasha Schmidt
- International Federation of Journalists – Oliver Money-Kyrle

- Media Diversity Institute - Milica Pesic
- Reporters Without Borders – Lucie Morillon
- Open Society Institute - Assistance Foundation/Azerbaijan - Rovshan N. Bagirov
- World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers - Rodrigo Bonilla