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PRESS RELEASE

**Azerbaijan: Media and Civil Society Under Threat from
Proposed Legal Amendments**

In spite of an outcry from national and international civil society groups, the Parliament of Azerbaijan, the *Milli Mejlis*, will take forward a debate on legal amendments to several laws governing civil society and the media on 30 June 2009. ARTICLE 19, along with partner organisations in Azerbaijan, call on the government to refrain from passing any legislative amendments that will impede the right to freedom of expression and freedom of association.

These draft legislative amendments include provisions allowing the government to disband organisations who have received three administrative sentences within two years for writing so-called “biased” articles. Founders of media outlets and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) closed by the government could be banned from setting up similar organisations for up to five years.

Foreign groups will be unable to open offices using international funding, unless there is a formal agreement between Azerbaijan and the country of origin. In addition, anyone who speaks on behalf of an organisation not registered in Azerbaijan (which includes foreign or international NGOs) faces the threat of an administrative sanction. Organisations may also be liable for fines up to AZN50,000 (approximately USD62,000).

The amendments were first tabled to be discussed on 19 June 2009, but the *Milli Mejlis* postponed the debate following a broad international and national outcry – including from ARTICLE 19 and other human rights groups – about the lack of public consultation and the negative effect they could have on the already difficult environment civil society and media organisations. Although some of the new amendments appear to have been watered down, they could still have a negative impact.

“None of these proposed amendments should be adopted as they will hamper the activities of independent NGOs, in particular human rights organisations in such a way that they will be unable to operate,” says Emin Huseynov of the Institute for Reporters’ Freedom and Safety in Baku. *“We will end up with a situation, such as currently exists in Belarus and other totalitarian states, where [the only] registered organisations are pro-government NGOs and those critical of the government are refused registration and become effectively illegal.”*

Civil society and the media in Azerbaijan have been under threat for several years and the pending amendments seem to be another attempt by the government to suppress them.

“There has been no official explanation as to why these amendments have to be made,” added Rashid Hajili, head of the Media Rights Institute in Baku. *“Their first draft was only made public on 9 June and was put on the agenda without meaningful consultation with civil society; this is not the way legislation should be developed. Any further restrictions imposed on the media and NGOs will damage our already fragile civil society.”*

ARTICLE 19 Executive Director, Dr Agnès Callamard, comments, *“The last few weeks mark an escalation in the steady erosion of freedom and human rights that Azerbaijan has witnessed for several years now. The Milli Mejlis is facing an important choice: between abandoning its duty to the people of Azerbaijan or upholding and protecting their rights and freedoms. We call on them to make the right decision for the present and future of the Azerbaijan.”*

ARTICLE 19 urges the *Milli Mejlis* to uphold the obligations that Azerbaijan has as a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention of Human Rights, and fully respect the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- 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.