



For immediate release – 11 April 2011

PRESS RELEASE

Azerbaijan: Forgotten Human Rights Crisis Unfolds at Council of Europe's Doorstep

Strasbourg 11.04.11: Inspired by pro-democracy uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, a recent wave of protests in Azerbaijan has resulted in scores of bloggers, journalists, civil society activists and opposition political party members harassed, arrested and beaten. In a disturbing new step, the Azerbaijani authorities have launched criminal charges against a cyber activist based outside of Azerbaijan. Strasbourg-based cyber activist Elnur Majidli, who was involved in organising the protests via his Facebook page, is currently facing charges of inciting hatred.

As the freedom of expression situation in the country continues to deteriorate in the wake of this government clampdown, representatives of the International Partnership Group for Azerbaijan (IPGA) are set to highlight their concerns during the upcoming Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) session in Strasbourg from 11-15 April 2011.

“The human rights situation in Azerbaijan has reached a critical level. We are receiving almost daily reports of abuse against cyber activists, journalists and others in connection with exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. This raises the question: how many more need to be arrested or beaten before the Council of Europe takes action to hold this Member State accountable? The credibility of the Council of Europe depends on such stewardship”, said Dr Agnès Callamard, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19.

Key areas of concern for the IPGA delegation include the recent wave of arrests of bloggers and activists in connection with the protests – some of whom face long prison sentences on the basis of politically motivated charges; increased pressure on non-governmental organisations working on democracy and human rights issues, including the closure of the Human Rights House Azerbaijan; the recent abduction and beating of two journalists in connection with their criticism of the authorities; and the continued wrongful imprisonment of journalist Eynulla Fatullayev, who remains in jail despite a European Court of Human Rights judgment ordering his release.

“This sudden spate of arrests of opposition activists and journalists is alarming. We are deeply concerned by the arrests that took place before the scheduled protests, as this suggests that the authorities are trying to silence people before they even begin to exercise their right to freedom of expression”, said Emin Huseynov, Chairman of the Baku-based Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety.

The IPGA delegation urges the Council of Europe and PACE national delegations to immediately increase their monitoring of Azerbaijan's compliance with its Council of Europe obligations and hold Azerbaijan accountable.

The delegation is comprised of representatives from ARTICLE 19, the Human Rights House Foundation, Index on Censorship, and the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety.

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NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information or to arrange an interview with spokespersons please contact Mona Samari at ARTICLE 19 at +44 (0)7515 828939 or mona@article19.org.
- The following spokespersons are available for interview: Rebecca Vincent from ARTICLE 19; Ane Tusvik Bonde from the Human Rights House Foundation; Michael Harris from Index on Censorship; and Emin Huseynov from the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety.
- The International Partnership Group for Azerbaijan is a coalition of 20 international NGOs working to promote and protect freedom of expression in Azerbaijan. For more information about the Partnership, please contact Rebecca Vincent at ARTICLE 19 at +44 (0)207 324 2500 or rebecca@article19.org.