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Azerbaijan: Government sends dangerous message on ethnically-motivated violence

Amnesty International is concerned that the actions of the Azerbaijani government following the extradition of Armed Forces Lieutenant Ramil Safarov will be perceived as an endorsement of ethnically-motivated violence.

The organization is concerned that these actions will ignite existing tensions between Azerbaijanis and Armenians and encourage further ethnically-motivated violence. It called on the governments of both countries to publicly condemn violence based on ethnicity.

Safarov, who by his own admission all but decapitated another man in part because he was Armenian, was pardoned and then promoted to Major by President Aliyev following his release from prison on Friday.

By pardoning and then promoting Ramil Safarov, President Aliyev has signalled to Azerbaijanis that violence against Armenians is not only acceptable, but rewarded.

The Azerbaijani government should rescind any privileges awarded to Safarov and publicly condemn ethnic violence. The Armenian government must also make clear that retaliation against ethnic Azerbaijanis is not acceptable.

Safarov was sentenced to life in prison by a Budapest Court in 2006 for murdering Armenian soldier Gurgun Margaryan.

The two were attending a NATO English language course in Hungary in February 2004 when Safarov broke into Margaryan's dormitory and attacked him with an axe as he slept, inflicting 16 blows to the head and neck which almost severed Margaryan's head.

Safarov admitted to the murder, claiming that Margaryan had insulted his country's flag. The court found no evidence to support this claim. He said he was sorry he had not had the opportunity to kill any Armenians earlier.

He also said that he was seeking revenge for the death of Azerbaijanis during the 1988 - 1994 conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

At the time Azerbaijani human rights Ombudswoman Elmira Suleymanova called the sentence "unjust" and said she hoped that Safarov could be extradited to Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani press, including state-owned media outlets, reported on the case as though Safarov was a national hero.

On Friday 31 August, the Hungarian government allowed Safarov to be extradited back to Azerbaijan, claiming to have received assurances that he would serve the remainder of his sentence.

On his arrival in Baku, Safarov was pardoned, promoted to Major, given back pay for the eight years he had spent in prison and awarded a house.

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