

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: EUR 55/005/2007 (Public)
News Service No: 010

Embargo Date: 24 January 2007 00:01 GMT

Azerbaijan: Rising tide of intimidation against independent journalism

Published

[E]veryone may enjoy freedom of thought and speech.

Azerbaijani Constitution, Article 47

Journalists striving to expose the misuse of government power are increasingly living under the threat of politically motivated arrests, physical assault and even death, Amnesty International said today. The organization's report, *Azerbaijan: The contracting space for freedom of expression*, reveals a pattern of encroachment on the rights of members of civil society, and in particular journalists, to freedom of expression.

"Journalists are only free to express opinions that fall in line with government directives. Anyone daring to voice criticism of the authorities or to expose Azerbaijan's enduring corruption problem faces an uncertain future, despite President Ilham Aliyev's assurances that attacks on journalists are unacceptable," said Laurence Broers, Amnesty International's expert on Azerbaijan.

"The Azerbaijani authorities have an obligation to uphold commitments to a healthy environment for the free dissemination of information and exchange of opinions, including those alleging official wrongdoing and abuse of public office. Government officials in Azerbaijan must understand that it is a legitimate function of the media to put their activities under public scrutiny and that such scrutiny must not lead to violence against journalists."

Amnesty International notes that sanctions against opposition or independent journalists in Azerbaijan have become both more frequent and more severe. This trend has seemingly been prompted by the prominent role of freedom of expression in the changes of regime in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004 respectively.

The ongoing assault on freedom of expression in Azerbaijan appears to be three-pronged -- the harassment and ill-treatment of journalists by police and other law enforcement officials, especially during election campaigns; assaults, and in one case murder, of journalists by unknown individuals; and the silencing of journalists through their arrest and imprisonment on dubious charges or by heavy fines following trials for criminal defamation.

With alarming consistency, it is journalists associated with the opposition that are the victims of physical

assault. None of the investigations into these physical assaults has yielded a conviction, contributing to a climate of impunity for such attacks. To Amnesty International's knowledge, there are no instances of attacks on pro-government journalists. With the same consistency outspoken independent media outlets have been accused of violating administrative and regulatory standards and in some cases their professional activities have been immediately and arbitrarily suspended without right to appeal.

"Assaulting and killing journalists with impunity has a chilling effect on the growth of civil society and the wider human rights environment. These attacks must be conclusively investigated and those responsible brought to justice to counter the current environment of fear and self-censorship," Laurence Broers said.

Emin Hüseynov of the Institute for Reporter Freedom and Safety in the capital Baku commented that respect for freedom of expression in Azerbaijan is in continuous decline and journalists are increasingly going to the European Court of Human Rights after failing to obtain justice at home. He said:

"Independent and foreign media are the only existing outlets where alternative opinion can be expressed. With presidential elections coming in 2008, the authorities are going to increase their attempts to stifle independent media so that no critical voice is heard. International institutions and organizations must increase their pressure on the government to guarantee the right to freedom of expression."

Amnesty International calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to ensure the prompt and conclusive investigation of assaults on journalists, to institute measures to tackle institutionalized impunity for harassment of journalists by law enforcement officials, to end the use of criminal defamation suits as a means to silence dissent and to ensure that due process is observed in the enforcement of media industry standards.

Cases

On 25 December 2006, Nicat Hüseynov, a journalist working for the opposition *Azadliq* newspaper, was attacked with a knife by unknown men as he left his home in Baku for work. He was admitted to hospital with internal injuries, head injuries and a minor stab wound. He had published a number of articles on the subject of corruption in high office and claimed that he had received a number of threatening phone calls in the period preceding the attack.

Sakit Zahidov, a well-known journalist and satirist for the *Azadliq* newspaper, was arrested on 23 June 2006 allegedly for possessing heroin. Opposition journalists believe that the heroin was planted on him by police and that his arrest was politically motivated because of the satirical column he wrote for *Azadliq*, in which he regularly criticized the Azerbaijani government. Reports of Sakit Zahidov's trial suggested that no conclusive evidence was brought at the trial proving that he was or had ever been a user of illegal narcotics. On 4 October, Sakit Zahidov was sentenced to three years' imprisonment.

See: *Azerbaijan: The contracting space for freedom of expression*, (AI Index: EUR 55/003/2007), <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur550032007>

Azerbaijan: Climate of impunity fosters new assaults on opposition journalists in Azerbaijan, (AI Index: EUR 55/001/2007), <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur550012007>

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>