

Mr Thobjørn Jagland
Secretary General
Council of Europe
F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex

Cc: Directors of Political Advice and Human Rights
Committee of Ministers' and CPT Secretariat

Brussels, 4 April 2014

Dear Secretary General,

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS OFFICE

Ref: B1545

PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE IN AZERBAIJAN AHEAD OF THE CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE'S COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS

Amnesty International would like to draw your attention to the worsening human rights situation in Azerbaijan, and particularly the criminal prosecution and imprisonment of civil society and political activists. This comes as the country prepares to assume the Chairmanship of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers on 14 May 2014.

Human rights violations documented by Amnesty International suggest that Azerbaijan's human rights record remains poor and continues to deteriorate, especially in relation to (but not restricted to) freedom of expression, assembly and association. The organisation is particularly concerned about the detention and unfair trials of peaceful protesters including civil society activists and critics of the government. Amnesty International also receives regular reports on the use of torture and other forms of ill-treatment in Azerbaijan for "investigation" purposes.

Amnesty International currently considers sixteen detained activists in Azerbaijan prisoners of conscience, who have been arrested or imprisoned on criminal charges solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. These include eight young activists from the "NIDA" civic movement.

In light of the above, Amnesty International calls on you to:

- Urge the government of Azerbaijan to immediately and unconditionally release the eight NIDA activists, and all other prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan
- Urge the government of Azerbaijan to fully respect and protect the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly, as guaranteed under Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights; and ensure that everyone can peacefully enjoy these rights
- Raise the case of the detained NIDA activists and Azerbaijan's other prisoners of conscience, as well as the issue of persecution and imprisonment of peaceful protesters and opposition activists by Azerbaijan within the Council of Europe's different fora; and ensure that the discussion solicits a necessary and strong response in the run-up to Azerbaijan assuming the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers

Please find more details on the sixteen prisoners of conscience in the below annex. Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Nicolas J. Beger
Director
Amnesty International European Institutions Office

Prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan

There are currently at least sixteen prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan, who have been imprisoned or detained as criminal suspects in connection with their attempts to peacefully exercise their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. These include eight young activists from the “NIDA” civic movement: Rashadat Akundov, Mammad Azizov, Bakhtiyar Guliyev, Zaur Gurbanli, Rashad Hasanov, Uzeyir Mammadli, Shahin Novruzlu and Ilkin Rustamzade. They were detained over a period of time from 7 March to 17 May 2013 on charges of possessing explosives and intent of public disorder. Amnesty International believes that the charges against them are fabricated, and the actual reason for their arrest was their criticism of the government and online activism that called for peaceful demonstrations. The activists are now in pre-trial detention and are likely to face up to 12 years in prison. Amnesty International considers the detained NIDA activists prisoners of conscience.

Mammad Azizov, Bakhtiyar Guliyev and Shahin Novruzlu, who were the first NIDA activists to be arrested on 7 March 2013, spoke of being tortured by officials from the Ministry of National Security of Azerbaijan immediately after being taken into custody. Two days after their arrest, footage of what they now claim to have been forced confessions, were aired on the national television. Shahin Novruzlu – who was only 17 at the time of his arrest – told his lawyer, and later the court, that he had been beaten and otherwise ill-treated, and lost four front teeth as a result of the physical abuse. Like his fellow detained NIDA activists, Shahin Novruzlu was denied the opportunity to be represented by a lawyer of his choosing, and no effort was made to ensure that a legal guardian was present during his interrogation by officials. No effective investigation has been carried out into his allegations of torture and other ill-treatment.¹

Amnesty International also considers the following civil society activists prisoners of conscience: Sardar Alibeyli, Anar Mammadli, Bakhtiyar Mammadov, Hilal Mammadov, Ilgar Mammadov, Dashgin Melikov, Rashad Ramazanov and Tofiq Yagublu. These people should not be behind bars. Amnesty International will continue campaigning internationally for their immediate and unconditional release.²

¹ Amnesty International receives regular reports of the use of torture and other ill-treatment in Azerbaijan for “investigation” purposes and has documented the following cases: Amnesty International, [“Political activists held on fabricated charges must be released”](#), press release, 14 March 2014; [“Opposition party loses HQ after explosion and sees seven members arrested within 2 weeks”](#) (AI Index: EUR 55/01/2014), public statement, 7 March 2014; [“Freedom of expression restricted further, NGO leader persecuted”](#) (AI Index: EUR 55/013/2013), public statement, 23 December 2013; [“Detained journalist alleges torture: Parviz Hashimli”](#) (AI Index: EUR 55/012/2013), urgent action, 13 December 2013; [“Journalist and writer jailed as ruthless crackdown continues”](#) (AI Index: PRE01/602/2013), press release, 13 November 2013; [“Downward Spiral: Continuing Crackdown on Freedoms in Azerbaijan”](#) (AI Index EUR 55/010/2013), 8 October 2013; [“Azerbaijan starts Presidential election campaign with at least 14 Prisoners of Conscience”](#) (AI Index: EUR 55/006/2013), public statement, 8 August 2013; [“Increased punishment for peaceful protestors is a step backwards”](#) (AI index: EUR 55/020/2012), public statement, 6 November 2012.

² For more information on the criminal prosecution of these individuals in connection with their civil society activism, see the following documents: Amnesty International, [“Azerbaijan starts Presidential election campaign with at least 14 Prisoners of Conscience”](#) (AI Index: EUR 55/006/2013), public statement, 8 August 2013; [“Azerbaijan: Journalist and writer jailed as ruthless crackdown continues”](#) (AI Index: PRE01/602/2013), press release, 13 November 2013; [“Freedom of expression restricted further, NGO leader persecuted”](#) (AI Index: EUR 55/013/2013), public statement, 23 December 2013.