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Federica Mogherini
EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Vice President of the European Commission
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200
Brussels 1049
Belgium

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Dear High Representative

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN AZERBAIJAN

I am writing to urge you to raise concerns both publicly and privately during your forthcoming visit to Baku over the deteriorating human rights record in Azerbaijan and wrongful imprisonment of government critics.

In the last few years, the Azerbaijani authorities have effectively crippled and eliminated independent civil society in all its forms. Independent media outlets and leading human rights NGOs have been shut down and their leaders have been imprisoned under fabricated charges. Independent journalists, bloggers and civil society activists have been harassed, arrested or forced to flee the country because of the fear of reprisals. Opposition parties have been effectively dismantled with their leaders and activists behind bars on fabricated charges and their followers facing harassment and intimidation.

Amnesty International currently recognizes no less than 18 prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan, imprisoned solely for peaceful exercise of their right to free expression. These include the leaders of the Azerbaijani civil society: the investigative journalist **Khadija Ismayilova**, the head of the NGO Legal Education Society **Intigam Aliyev** and the founder of the NGO Human Rights Club **Rasul Jafarov**. All three were arrested in 2014 under trumped up criminal charges, including purported financial irregularities and abuse of authority in connection with their journalism or NGO work. In addition to human rights defenders Azerbaijan imprisons journalists, opposition leaders and activists critical of the government. They are: **Abdul Abilov, Rashadat Akundov, Mammad Azizov, Rashad Hasanov, Elvin Karimov, Faraj Karimov, Siraj Karimov, Anar Mammadli, Hilal Mammadov, Ilgar Mammadov, Omar Mammadov, Rashad Ramazanov, Ilkin Rustamzade, Yadigar Sadigov** and **Tofiq Yagublu**. They should be released immediately and unconditionally. Our list of those wrongfully imprisoned is almost certainly incomplete as it includes only cases on which Amnesty International has been able to collect sufficient information. According to Azerbaijani civil society experts, currently there are more than 90 persons behind bars on politically motivated crimes in Azerbaijan.

Prominent Azerbaijani human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience, **Leyla Yunus** and her husband **Arif Yunus** were released from jail on 9 December and 12 November 2015 respectively. However, their release is conditional and Leyla and Arif Yunus are placed under a travel ban, which prevents them from accessing the

much needed medical treatment abroad. The health of 53 year old Intigam Aliyev has also dramatically worsened in prison; he remains in constant pain, lacks access to adequate medical care in prison facilities that are not heated despite the severe winters in Baku.

Since 2015, independent monitoring of human rights in Azerbaijan also become increasingly difficult. Representatives of Amnesty International, as well as several international human rights organizations and international media, are barred from entering Azerbaijan. Amnesty International's delegation was refused entry into Azerbaijan and deported from Baku Heydar Aliyev International Airport on 7 October 2015. Azerbaijan has become a closed country, both for local human rights defenders, as well as international human rights workers. Meanwhile the assaults on freedom of expression, assembly and association are continuing behind closed doors. A few remaining independent journalists face threats and reprisals both in the country and abroad. Relatives of exiled media workers who continue to work from abroad for independent media outlets face harassment and intimidation, including arrests under questionable criminal charges. Recent protests against the deteriorating economic conditions have been violently dispersed and political activists have been arbitrarily detained in connection with the protests.

In the context of current discussions around the EU Global Strategy, many civil society partners have highlighted Azerbaijan as one of the most pressing examples of contradictory human rights policy by the EU. It is felt that in efforts to secure agreements on the Energy Union and other deals that the very serious human rights situation is being ignored or down played. Your upcoming visit to Baku therefore provides a significant opportunity to set the record straight on the EU's human rights policy and to call for specific improvements in Azerbaijan's deteriorating human rights record. In accordance with existing EU commitments, including those contained in the EU Strategic Framework and Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, we call on you to:

- Use both quiet and public diplomacy to raise human rights concerns during your visit to Baku, raise individual cases of concern as well as systemic issues and specifically call for the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience;
- Request permission to visit prisoners of conscience in custody and meet with recently released human rights defenders to show support for the work of human rights defenders and independent civil society in Azerbaijan;
- Urge the Azerbaijani authorities to allow local civil society organizations to resume their work as well as to allow international human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, an unimpeded access to Azerbaijan for human rights work;
- Place respect for human rights visibly high on the agenda in all future relations with the Azerbaijan authorities and work together with the President of the European Council, other Commissioners and the member states to ensure that all opportunities are used strategically to press the Azerbaijani authorities to respect the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Yours sincerely,



Iverna McGowan
Advocacy Director
Head of the European Institutions Office

ANNEX:**Links to Amnesty International publications on Azerbaijan**

Amnesty International has documented in detail the politically motivated persecution and trumped up nature of the charges against human rights defenders and activists in Azerbaijan.

More details can be found in the following three Amnesty International publications:

Azerbaijan: the Repression Games: The voices you won't hear at the first European Games
(<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/1732/2015/en/>),

Azerbaijan: Guilty of Defending Rights: Azerbaijan's human rights defenders and activists behind bars
(<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/1077/2015/en/>)

Behind bars: Silencing dissent in Azerbaijan
(<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR55/004/2014/en>).