

EXTERNAL

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Olga Gareginovna ARUTYUNOVA

AZERBAIDZHANI REPUBLIC

Olga Arutyunova, whose name indicates an ethnic Armenian origin, was detained by police in her home city of Baku, the capital of Azerbaydzhani, on 4 February 1994. At the time of writing no criminal charge is known to have been brought against her, although her detention is believed to be formally in connection with alleged passport irregularities.

Amnesty International is concerned by reports from unofficial sources that Olga Arutyunova (also known as Arutyunyan) was detained on grounds of her ethnic origin, rather than in connection with a criminal offence, in order to be exchanged for two ethnic Azeris being held hostage in connection with the Karabakh conflict.

Amnesty International is seeking further information on the case of Olga Arutyunova. If the reports are confirmed, the organization will regard her as a prisoner of conscience who should be released immediately and unconditionally.

Background

Olga Arutyunova was born on 29 January 1944 in Baku, Azerbaydzhani, and by profession is a physics teacher. Her mother and husband are Russian, and her passport reportedly gives her nationality as Russian also, but she is said to have suffered persecution in various forms in recent years as her middle name and surname are identifiably Armenian. According to unofficial sources her passport was taken from her in March 1991 by the authorities, and her flat was then unlawfully confiscated in March 1992. On 4 February 1994 when Olga Arutyunova responded to a request that she visit the procuracy to discuss the case, she was detained by the police and taken to the special holding centre of the Main Police Administration in the settlement of Binagady near Baku.

It was thought initially that Olga Arutyunova would be charged with "violation of the regulations on the passport system" under Article 198 of the Azerbaydzhani Criminal Code, which carries a punishment of up to one year's imprisonment for residing without an internal passport. However, at the time of writing it is reported that she has yet to be charged formally with a criminal offence and so has not been able to have access to a defence lawyer. It is also alleged that officials holding Olga Arutyunova wish to exchange her for two Azeris held hostage by ethnic Armenians.

Hostage-taking of non-combatant civilians has been widespread during the armed conflict over the disputed region of Karabakh, an enclave in Azerbaydzhani inhabited mainly by ethnic Armenians. Unofficial groups in both Armenia and Azerbaydzhani have lists of hundreds of people who are said to have gone missing or to be held hostage or captive following combat operations. In some cases the hostages are reported to have been held directly by forces under the control of the respective administrations. In other cases they have been held by private families, seeking an exchange for one of their members, with the apparent complicity of the authorities.

Hostage-taking has been reported not only in Karabakh itself, but also widely beyond its borders. Over a dozen ethnic Armenian citizens of the republic of Georgia, for example, are said by that country's parliamentary Human Rights Commission to have been detained as hostage by Azerbaydzhani law enforcement officials while they were in transit through Azerbaydzhan. The case of two such people, Vilik Oganezov and Artavaz Mirzoyan, was raised with the Azerbaydzhani authorities by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. This body concluded, in Decision No. 31/1993 (Azerbaydzhan), that their detention was arbitrary and in contravention of international standards.

Ethnic Azeri citizens of Georgia are also said to have been seized from that country and taken to Armenia to be held as hostages. Yolchu Akhmed ogy Gyoyushov and his relative Ramazan Gasym ogy Mamedov, for example, were said to have been seized by ethnic Armenians while tending cattle in the Bolnisi district of Georgia and were later traced to the Armenian city of Vanadzor.

For further information on this issue please see the Amnesty International document Azerbaydzhan - Hostages in the Karabakh conflict: civilians continue to pay the price, AI Index: EUR 55/08/93.

Hostage-taking of non-combatant civilians is totally forbidden by Common Article 3 which appears in all four Geneva Conventions of 1949. Amnesty International is continuing to urge all parties to the conflict in Karabakh to ensure that no one is detained as a hostage, or otherwise held solely on the grounds of their ethnic origin. The organization has also appealed to all sides to protect non-combatants from all acts of reprisal and violence and to treat prisoners in their custody humanely. It has called for all alleged abuses within its mandate to be investigated fully and impartially, with the results made public and the perpetrators brought to justice.