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## **Azerbaijan: Journalist and writer jailed as ruthless crackdown continues**

The Azerbaijani authorities must halt their crackdown on freedom of expression, Amnesty International urged today as a journalist and a writer who criticized the government were jailed on trumped-up charges.

"Azerbaijan's ruthless and relentless attack on any dissenting voices in the media continues apace with these shameful convictions and jail sentences, which appear to be based on offences fabricated by the prosecution," said John Dalhuisen of Amnesty International.

Rashad Ramazanov, a writer and blogger who spoke out against the authorities in his posts on Facebook and YouTube, was sentenced to nine years in prison on dubious drug charges.

Also today, pro-opposition newspaper editor Sardar Alibeyli was handed a four-year prison sentence on charges of "hooliganism".

"Rashad Ramazanov and Sardar Alibeyli are prisoners of conscience, jailed solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression, and they must be immediately and unconditionally released," said John Dalhuisen.

Today's jail sentences come amid a continuing and widespread crackdown on government critics in Azerbaijan, including media workers, NGOs and human rights activists.

Amnesty International believes that there are at least 18 prisoners of conscience in the country, many of them jailed for speaking out against the authorities in the media.

Rashad Ramazanov was arrested on 9 May 2013 and taken to the Organized Crime Unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, where officials claimed to have found 9.05 grams of heroin in his trouser pocket. He denied the charges and insisted that the drugs had been planted on him.

The writer's family and lawyer were not notified of his whereabouts for four days and, when his lawyer was finally allowed to meet him on 17 May, he saw that Rashad had serious and extensive bruises on his head.

Rashad Ramazanov told his lawyers that he had been severely beaten several times while he was held in custody by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Police have denied the claims. There has been no official investigation into them.

His wife, Konul Ismayilova, told Amnesty International that he had been beaten to punish him for his criticism of President Ilham Aliyev and his family, and in order to force him to confess.

"By law, Rashad Ramazanov should have been transferred to an Investigative Detention Centre within 24

hours of the court decision ordering him to serve three months of pre-trial detention, but he was inexplicably kept at the Ministry of Internal Affairs for 11 days," said John Dalhuisen.

Requests for Rashad Ramazanov to undergo medical examination were ignored by investigators, while the only witnesses in his trial were the officials who detained him.

"We have nothing to apologise for, and though we are suffering, we are not guilty of anything," Konul Ismayilova told Amnesty International.

Sardar Alibeyli, the editor of newspaper Nota Bene and its accompanying news site PS Nota, was detained on 31 July 2013 after a man claimed that he had beaten him and struck his face with a stone.

The man accusing Sardar Alibeyli subsequently changed his account, but this was ignored by the court.

None of the defence witnesses were permitted to give evidence during his trial, while Sardar Alibeyli, who denies the charges, said he did not recognize the man who accused him.

The journalist's arrest came after his newspaper had been highly critical of the government and provided a platform for other government critics, including political exiles.

"With this wave of arrests and convictions, Azerbaijan's government is sending a clear and ominous message that dissent will not be tolerated," said John Dalhuisen.

In the months before and after the 9 October presidential election, there has been an increasingly repressive media environment and a continuing crackdown on civil society and political activists in Azerbaijan.

The prosecution of journalists has been accompanied by increasing pressure against opposition and independent newspapers.

Mounting compensation claims, freezing of bank accounts and bans on the sale of critical newspapers in kiosks in the underground system has resulted in two of the most popular opposition newspapers, Azadliq and Yeni Musavat, to halt publication of their daily issues in the past week.

"Ilham Aliyev's recent re-election appears to have done nothing to reduce the Azerbaijani authorities' enthusiasm for persecution and censorship. These new cases and the squeeze on the two leading opposition newspapers sadly confirms the Aliyev regime's determination not just to beat – but to silence – all political opposition," said John Dalhuisen.