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AZERBAIJAN: AN INTERNATIONAL YOUTH FORUM CONVENED IN A COUNTRY WHICH IMPRISONS YOUTH FOR PEACEFUL ACTIVISM

The UN and the Council of Europe will convene the first Global Forum on Youth Policies in Azerbaijan, a country which has on numerous recent occasions imprisoned peaceful youth activists. Over the last years, several young human rights defenders, bloggers and social media activists have been arrested and sentenced to years in prison for nothing more than trying to exercise their right to freedom of expression. Those who peacefully protested against their conviction too, were thrown behind bars. There are currently no fewer than 21 prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan. Of these three are young people under 23 years of age.

The first Global Forum on Youth Policies takes place on 28-30 October in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. The Forum will bring together around 700 youth policy practitioners from around the world, with the declared objective of developing guiding principles for integrated youth policy development. The Forum will be convened by the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth together with UNDP, UNESCO and the Council of Europe, and will be hosted by the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Azerbaijan in the framework of Azerbaijan's Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

Arrest and imprisonment of NIDA youth activists

NIDA is a pro-democracy youth movement which has been facing pressure and harassment from the Azerbaijani authorities ever since its creation in 2011, and several of its members have been criminally prosecuted. NIDA members Rashadat Akhundov, Mammad Azizov, Bakhtiyar Guliyev, Zaur Gurbanli, Rashad Hasanov, Uzeyir Mammadli, Shahin Novruzlu and Ilkin Rustamzade were arrested between March and May 2013 after they created a Facebook event calling for a peaceful protest against non-combat military deaths in the Azerbaijani army.

Following their arrest, the activists were charged with "inciting public disorder" and possession of illegal drugs and firearms. Their homes were searched, and drugs and Molotov cocktails were allegedly found. Their families maintain that the drugs and Molotov cocktails were planted by police and reported numerous irregularities during searches of their homes. Amnesty International believes this evidence was fabricated in order to target them for their activism. Planting of false evidence had been used by the Azerbaijani authorities in the past, in order to instigate criminal cases against political opponents of the regime.

Some of the arrested NIDA activists were allegedly tortured in detention, in order to get their confessions. However, their complaints of torture have never been effectively investigated, and all of them were eventually handed down guilty sentences, even though the evidence of their torture and other ill-treatment was in some cases difficult to ignore. Thus, Shahin Novruzlu, who was 17 years old at the time and was interrogated without the presence of his legal guardian as the law requires, was missing four of his front teeth during his first court appearance, during the remand hearing shortly after his arrest and following first rounds of interrogation. Another NIDA activist, Mammad Azizov, lost hearing in one of his ears as a result of ill-treatment in custody. All arrested NIDA activists were found guilty and sentenced to between 6 to 8 years of imprisonment.

Attacking a peaceful protest in support of the youth activists

On 6 May 2014, the day when guilty sentenced were being handed out to the arrested NIDA activists, some 150 of their supporters – themselves mostly young people – gathered peacefully outside the Baku City Court. Some of the supporters shouted protest slogans after the verdicts were read out in the courtroom. In response, plainclothes and uniformed police officers used force to break up the gathering. Protesters were punched and journalists had their cameras thrown on the ground.

At least 26 individuals were dragged into a waiting police bus and driven to a nearby police station. Five activists were sentenced to between 15 and 30 days of administrative detention for participating in this event. One of the activists, Kemale Benenyarli, was reportedly tortured in custody.

Amnesty International has addressed the Azerbaijani authorities expressing its concern over the break-up of a peaceful assembly, use of abusive force against the peaceful protesters by police, arrest and the subsequent administrative detention of several participants, and the ill-treatment of Kemale Benenyarli. In a letter received by Amnesty International in response, the Azerbaijani authorities replied that the sentences of between 15 to 30 days in police detention was a punishment for participation in an “unauthorized demonstration” and “ignoring requests of police officers to respect public order”.

Release of Shahin Novruzlu and Bakhtiyar Guliyev

An open letter written by Bakhtiyar Guliyev was disseminated in Azerbaijani media and subsequently published on the website of the Penitentiary Service of Azerbaijan on 2 June 2014. In the letter, Bakhtiyar Guliyev confessed his “crime” of organizing public unrest and asked the President of Azerbaijan for pardon.

Later, on 10 July, another NIDA member, Shahin Novruzlu appealed to the President of Azerbaijan and asked him for pardon. Shahin Novruzlu’s statement read that he “will not continue to be a member of any political organization (and will) live as a worthy citizen (of Azerbaijan)”.

Previously, the families and lawyers of the NIDA activists had reported unexpected prison visits by officials to each activist, trying to convince them to sign a letter of apology. As Shahin Novruzlu’s lawyer stated, he is certain that his client was put under psychological pressure to ask for clemency.

On 17 October 2014 the President of Azerbaijan signed an order on pardon of Shahin Novruzlu and Bakhtiyar Guliyev. They were released on 18 October.

The release of Shahin Novruzlu and Bakhtiyar Guliyev is an important step, however, the other NIDA activists still remain behind bars. They will be in prison at the time when Azerbaijan will be welcoming participants at the Global Forum on Youth Policies, and will remain there for many years after unless Azerbaijan starts to demonstrate respect for basic human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Amnesty International believes that the Azerbaijani authorities have fabricated charges against the NIDA activists and considers them prisoners of conscience arrested for their pro-democracy activism. Rashadat Akhundov, Mammad Azizov, Zaur Gurbanli, Rashad Hasanov, Uzeyir Mammadli and Ilkin Rustamzade must be immediately and unconditionally released.

As of today, there are at least 21 prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan imprisoned solely for exercising their freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly. Besides the NIDA activists, these prisoners of conscience include other young activists from the Azerbaijani civil society, as well as prominent human rights defenders, journalists and politicians.

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