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Azerbaijan: arrest of opposition editor causes concern

Amnesty International today expressed concern about allegations that an opposition newspaper editor in Azerbaijan had been arrested on a trumped-up charge aimed at putting pressure on opposition parties in the run-up to forthcoming elections.

*Rauf Arifoglu, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Yeni Musavat*, was arrested on 22 August 2000 at his home in Baku after police claimed to have found an illegally-held "Makarov" pistol in the apartment.*

*Rauf Arifoglu strongly denies the charge, and claims that the pistol was planted by police to fabricate grounds for arrest and implicate him in a failed hijacking carried out by a member of the opposition *Musavat* party several days earlier.*

Four members of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA), another opposition party, are also said to have been detained in connection with the same attempted hijacking. Opposition parties sources allege that the authorities are using the hijack attempt to exert pressure on opposition parties at this politically sensitive time in the run up to parliamentary elections.

Amnesty International is seeking further information on the events surrounding these arrests, and in particular on the allegations that the pistol was planted on Rauf Arifoglu and that he and others have been detained solely because of their political allegiances.

"Given our concern at continuing allegations of ill-treatment in detention in Azerbaijan, we are also calling on the authorities to ensure

that all those detained are treated in accordance with domestic and international commitments to prevent torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment," Amnesty International said.

Background

Events leading to Rauf Arifoglu's arrest began on 18 August, when a man attempted to hijack an aircraft carrying over 100 passengers en route from the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan to the capital, Baku. Mehdi Israfil oglu Huseynli, described as a member of the opposition Musavat Party, is said to have threatened to blow up the plane unless the crew diverted it to the Turkish capital Ankara. He is also reported to have made a number of political demands to the Azerbaijani leadership regarding forthcoming parliamentary elections in November. Mehdi Huseynli was eventually overpowered on board and the plane landed safely in Baku. The Musavat Party swiftly issued a press statement condemning the attempted hijacking, and denying that the party itself had any knowledge of or involvement in the events.

Rauf Arifoglu's involvement began when Mehdi Huseynli telephoned him on his mobile phone, apparently while on the plane, to list his demands regarding the elections. Rauf Arifoglu said that immediately after the call he informed the Minister of National Security and the press services of the Interior Ministry and the General Procurator's Office. Rauf Arifoglu handed over a cassette tape of the conversation to police on 19 August, and also gave oral and written testimony.

Three days later police arrived at Rauf Arifoglu's apartment at around 5pm, and started to conduct a search. Rauf Arifoglu rang journalist colleagues to alert them to the search, and they gathered outside as police would not allow them to enter. Rauf Arifoglu's lawyer, Vidadi Makhmudov, was also reportedly denied permission to enter the apartment while the search was conducted. When the pistol

was found, Rauf Arifolgu shouted down to his colleagues that it had been planted, and refused to sign the police protocol of the search. He was arrested on a charge of illegally possessing a weapon, and taken away. It is further alleged that a television journalist outside attempting to video events had his camera taken away by police, who also physically assaulted him. According to his lawyer, Rauf Arifoglu is currently held in the investigation-isolation prison of the Ministry of National Security, and is refusing to give any evidence in protest at what he considers to be fabricated charges.

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