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AZERBAIJAN - POLITICAL OPPONENTS MAY FACE UNFAIR TRIAL

Amnesty International today expressed alarm that Tofiq Qasimov, a possible prisoner of conscience, is to stand trial next week despite having been diagnosed as suffering from a serious mental illness.

“We are extremely concerned that Tofiq Qasimov is not only made to stand trial in an unfit mental state, but also that there are allegations that the charges against him are false, and have actually been brought to punish him for his non-violent opposition to the Azerbaijani government,” Amnesty International said today.

Tofiq Qasimov, a member of parliament and prominent political figure of Azerbaijan, is to stand trial on 7 May after being charged with complicity in a failed coup attempt in March 1995. Amnesty International is concerned he faces a possible death sentence if convicted.

Tofiq Qasimov was diagnosed in February as suffering from reactive psychosis, a serious mental health problem induced by environmental circumstances. His poor state of health had led the authorities to release him pending trial, after some five months' detention. He was returned to his family in Baku on 22 February. He is continuing to receive medical treatment at home. His condition has improved, but he has reportedly not fully recovered and there are fears that the stress of standing trial will aggravate his mental problems.

Amnesty International has put its concerns repeatedly to the Azerbaijani authorities, and has urged them to ensure that Tofiq Qasimov receives a fair trial in line with international standards, should the case be brought to court.

Tofiq Qasimov's case has reportedly been linked to the cases against Adil Hajiyevev, an aide of fugitive former president Ayaz Mutalibov, and Kenan Gürel, an Austrian citizen of ethnic Turkish origin living in Azerbaijan. Both men have also been accused of treason in connection with the coup attempt of March 1995 and face a possible death sentence if convicted. Sources in Baku have alleged that these cases are totally unrelated and that the trial may be held behind closed doors because Kenan Gürel is a foreign citizen.

Adil Hajiyevev, who was extradited from Russia to Azerbaijan in February 1996, suffers from diabetes mellitus and unspecified heart trouble. There have been reports that his state of health has seriously deteriorated and that he has attempted to commit suicide on several occasions in pre-trial detention. Amnesty International had urged the Azerbaijani authorities to ensure that he receives all appropriate medical treatment. On 2 April he was transferred to prison hospital and is believed to be currently still in hospital. The organization is concerned that Adil Hajiyevev will also not be fit to stand trial on 7 May.

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