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Council of Europe must intervene after Azerbaijan imprisons more peaceful protesters

Scores of activists were detained and five sentenced to prison following a peaceful protest in Azerbaijan on Saturday, prompting Amnesty International to urge the Council of Europe to make clear it will stand up for free expression in the Caucasus country.

The arrest of around 80 peaceful protesters, 30 of whom were then charged, came just days after the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) failed to pass a resolution on political prisoners calling on Azerbaijan to cease arresting and prosecuting peaceful protesters.

Saturday's protest began as a peaceful gathering of more than 200 people in three separate locations in central Baku, the capital, to demonstrate against the authorities' violent dispersal of another, larger protest in the northern Azerbaijani city of Ismayili last week.

"Just days after PACE rejected a resolution on politically motivated arrests, the prosecution of these 30 individuals demonstrates how far the issue is from being resolved" said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International's Director for Europe and Central Asia.

"The PACE co-Rapporteurs responsible for monitoring Azerbaijan's obligations to the Council, Pedro Agramunt and Joseph Debono Grech, opposed the resolution on political prisoners proposed by German MP Christoph Strässer, stating they would address the problem of political prisoners themselves.

"Having taken on this responsibility, they must now intervene to ensure the sentences of those imprisoned or fined for taking part in Saturday's protest are overturned."

Unfair court hearings – lasting just minutes and using court-appointed lawyers – were held after Saturday's arrests, and 25 activists, including three people Amnesty International previously declared as prisoners of conscience, were handed heavy fines of between 300 and 2500 AZN (\$383 and \$3,186). The average monthly wage in Azerbaijan is \$513.

A further five activists were handed prison sentences for their role in the protest – 15 days for blogger and former prisoner of conscience Emin Milli, and 13 days each for Abulfaz Gurbanli, Rufat Abdullayev, Turkel Alisoy and Turkel Azerturk.

Among those arrested and put on trial was Khadija Ismayilova, a prominent independent journalist who was recently blackmailed and targeted in a smear campaign after she published a report on presidential corruption. She told Amnesty International:

"I was among the protesters in Sahil park [in central Baku]... [by then it was] already silent, as most of the protesters were dispersed. The group of the police attacked just to take me. I was screaming, asking who they are, as they never introduced themselves and what they want.

“My trial was a comedy. I entered the room where two men were sitting on the defence's place. I asked who they are and the judge said they were my lawyers. I said ‘I don't know these people, I don't trust them and I refuse. I want my own lawyers.’ I didn't know that in fact my lawyers were outside of the building and were not allowed in. The judge said I can't have my own lawyer as they are not here.”

Ismayili protests

Saturday's demonstration in Baku was a reaction to the violent dispersal of protests several days earlier in Ismayili, about 200km north-west of the capital. Police there used tear gas and rubber bullets against crowds calling for the resignation of a local governor. Several cars and at least two buildings were set ablaze during the unrest.

Hundreds of people were also detained during the Ismayili protests, and there have been allegations of torture in detention.

“Amnesty International is concerned at reports that several people arrested in relation to the unrest in Ismayili have been tortured and ill-treated while in custody. We are calling for an immediate, impartial and effective investigation into any such complaints,” said Dalhuisen.

“We are further calling on the Azerbaijani authorities to overturn the sentences of all those fined and sentenced in Baku for having taken part in Saturday's peaceful protest.”