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Azerbaijan must halt crackdown on protest organisers

Amnesty International is calling on Azerbaijan's authorities to immediately end their crackdown on activists preparing for a March 11 protest inspired by recent events in the Middle East and North Africa.

Activists say they have been detained, tortured and refused access to legal advice as part of a clampdown on the protest, which has been organised using social networking websites including Facebook.

"The Azerbaijani authorities must stop this crackdown immediately and allow activists to organise peaceful protests," said John Dalhuisen, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Europe and Central Asia Programme.

Activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, 29, was detained on 4 March for allegedly breaching a court order not to leave his native town of Ganja and was questioned by police about his views posted on Facebook.

He was remanded in custody for two months by a court in Ganja later the same day, pending a trial for evading military service. He could face two years in prison if convicted.

He passed a letter to his lawyer during the court hearing, saying he had been beaten, tortured and threatened with rape by police while in custody. He has gone on hunger strike in protest.

"Bakhtiyar Hajiyev has been continually harassed solely for peacefully expressing his views."

"Allegations of torture and ill-treatment must be promptly and thoroughly investigated," said John Dalhuisen.

Police claim he failed to register daily with them, which he had been required to do since a criminal case was opened against him in late January following his previous arrest in November 2010 for evading military service.

The Azerbaijani authorities have forcibly drafted government critics on previous occasions, including editor Eynulla Fatullayev, who Amnesty International considers to be a prisoner of conscience.

"The main aim of the Azerbaijani authorities is to scare young people into submission because of what is happening in the Arab world," said Fuad Hassanov, an Azerbaijani human rights activist.

Dayanat Babayev, a member of the Youth Committee of Popular Front Party, which has helped organise the protests, was also detained on 4 March. He was held in incommunicado for two days and sentenced to 10 days administrative detention for obstructing the police.

According to the police, he was detained on the street in Baku for cursing on the telephone. However, Dayanat Babayev maintains that he was arrested by officials from the security services in an internet café. His parents only found out about his detention on 6 March following unofficial inquiries and he met

with his lawyer today for the first time since his arrest.

Another man, Etibar Salmanly, a student who has been distributing leaflets advertising the 11 March protest, has gone into hiding after police called at his home this morning while he was out, reportedly to question him over allegations that he 'cursed a woman' in the street.