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AZERBAIJAN: AUTHORITIES MUST GUARANTEE THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY AND IMMEDIATELY RELEASE ALL PEACEFUL DEMONSTRATORS

The unlawful dispersal and arbitrary detention of peaceful demonstrators in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, on 19 and 20 October shows the disregard for the right to peaceful assembly in Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijani police declared that on 19 October they detained 60 demonstrators, releasing 42 after issuing them official warnings. The 18 remaining protestors were held in police stations prior to appearance before the courts. The Azerbaijani Popular Front Party – an opposition political party which was one of the organizers of the protest, declared that in addition to those detained at the demonstration, at least 93 of its members had already been detained or summoned to police stations before the rally commenced on 19 October.

Several social media videos show police using force against peaceful demonstrators, dragging them to police cars and sometimes beating them. Some detainees, including the opposition leader Ali Karimli, reported that they were ill-treated by the police in custody after arrest.

In advance of the protest, Azerbaijani authorities refused to provide a central location for the opposition rally organized by the National Council of Democratic Forces, a coalition of opposition parties in Azerbaijan. The police warned them that the demonstrations would be dispersed, and declared that the reason for the prohibition of the rally in central Baku was “to prevent violations of public order, riots and crime, and to protect the rights and freedoms of others”. Despite this, the National Council decided to go ahead with the demonstration in a central square of Baku. More than 200 people participated.

The demonstrators called for the release of people detained for political reasons and for a decrease of prices for natural gas and electricity, among other demands. Many protesters chanted for the resignation of the government.

On 20 October, police dispersed a small unauthorized rally in central Baku organized by Azerbaijani women human rights defenders who were protesting about violence against women in Azerbaijan. According to information available to Amnesty International, police detained a few participants, all of whom were released soon afterwards. Some women detained later uploaded photos on social media showing their bodies with bruises and other minor injuries further to the dispersal.

The protest was prompted by a notorious case of femicide in Baku, when in October a man killed his wife by stabbing her numerous times on a street in front of their children. The activists demanded the ratification of the Council of Europe’s Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence – also known as the Istanbul Convention. Ahead of

the protest, authorities had denied the permission for the rally stating it “would interfere with the leisure of the townspeople”.

Azerbaijan’s Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of peaceful assembly,¹ however, local municipalities often arbitrarily refuse permission for peaceful demonstrations organized by the opposition, particularly in the capital Baku. Police often rely on excessive and unnecessary force to disperse peaceful demonstrations.

Azerbaijani authorities must guarantee the right to freedom of peaceful assembly as recognized by the Azerbaijani constitution and the international human rights treaties that have been ratified by Azerbaijan.² The authorities must immediately and unconditionally release all the remaining demonstrators who have been detained solely for the exercise of their right to freedom of peaceful assembly and launch a prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigation into the allegations of ill-treatment by the police.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Amnesty International has for many years documented human rights violations in Azerbaijan. The rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly are unduly restricted and many journalists, human rights defenders and other activists have faced harassment, unjust prosecution under false charges and have been arbitrarily detained following unfair trials.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev signed a decree on 16 March 2019 to mark the Nowruz new year holiday, pardoning more than 400 people including youth activists and opposition politicians unjustly imprisoned on trumped-up charges. However, local human rights groups say that at least 74 more unjustly jailed activists, journalists and opposition politicians remain behind bars. Azerbaijan retains repressive legislation which makes it burdensome for civil society groups to operate, including onerous NGO registration and funding requirements.

Azerbaijan remains closed to human rights scrutiny. International human rights monitors, including Amnesty International, continue to be denied access to the country.

¹ Article 49 of the Constitution of Azerbaijan

² Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights