

News Service: 67/00

AI Index: EUR 55/01/00

7 April 2000

PUBLIC STATEMENT

AZERBAIJAN

Journalist detained in self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic -- a blow to freedom of expression

The Karabakh authorities should provide further information on the detention of journalist Vagram Aghajanian by officials in the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, a disputed enclave within Azerbaijan, Amnesty International urged today.

“If, as some reports reveal, Vagram Aghajanian was detained solely in connection with recent articles critical of the Karabakhi authorities, then this would be a serious blow to freedom of expression,” the organization said.

“We would welcome further information on the charges against Vagram Aghajanian as well as assurances that journalists, and every one else in Karabakh, are able to voice their opinion without fear of imprisonment.”

Vagram Aghajanian was detained on 28 March after officials from the Karabakh Ministry of Internal Affairs searched his home, reportedly without presenting a warrant, for items such as arms and drugs. No such items were found, but Vagram Aghajanian is subsequently said to have been sentenced to 10 days’ administrative detention after being found guilty of “*hampering the implementation of martial law*”. According to some reports his articles were regarded by officials as “*contributing to internal tension*” and thereby violating a 1999 presidential decree extending martial law in the region.

Vagram Aghajanian is a correspondent of the *Tasnerord naang* and *Iravunk* newspapers. These publications have recently been supportive of former Karabakh Minister of Defence Samvel Babaian, who was detained in a wave of arrests following an armed attack which injured Karabakh President Arkady Gukasian and two others on 22 March. Among those also detained in connection with the attack are Samvel Babaian’s brother, his brother-in-law, the head of his bodyguard and two bodyguards.

Amnesty International is calling on the Karabakh authorities to ensure that all necessary procedures for a fair trial are observed at each stage of the criminal proceedings into the 22 March attack. Such procedures include ensuring that all law enforcement officials are aware of, and adhere to, the absolute prohibition under international law of torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. They also include the presumption of innocence, which requires among other things that public authorities, particularly prosecutors and police, should not make public statements about the guilt or innocence of an accused person before the outcome of the trial.

As a result of hostilities the Azerbaijani government is at present unable to exercise *de facto* control over the disputed Karabakh region, and adjacent territories currently under Karabakhi control. Amnesty International addresses authorities in this region as those with *de facto* control (and responsibility) over the area, and not as a recognition of their status *de jure*.

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