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'More than 100' arrested in Azerbaijan as police break up peaceful protests

(Baku) Amnesty International has today condemned the violent dispersal of a peaceful opposition rally in the capital Baku that saw more than 100 reportedly detained and protesters punched and kicked by police.

About 300 people had gathered in Baku's Fountain Square for a rally held by the Musavat opposition party. Several people were also detained on their way to the event by the police.

“There is no justification for the heavy-handed tactics to be used against obviously peaceful protestors,” said Natalia Nozadze, Amnesty International's Azerbaijan expert who was present at the protest.

"All those detained merely for exercising their right to peaceful protest must be immediately released."

“The Azerbaijani authorities have an international obligation to allow peaceful protests. They must not continue to deny their citizens the right to freedom of expression and assembly.”

Demonstrators chanted “Liberty” and called for the resignation of the President and also called for the release of imprisoned activists.

Some of those present observing the protest said that they supported it, but were too afraid to join in.

The square was surrounded by over one hundred policemen. They targeted individuals chanting slogans, covered their mouths, and dragged them to police vans from the crowd.

Police punched several protestors in the head after they had taken them into custody. They also kicked protestors, journalists and another Amnesty International staff member as they cleared the square.

Police also repeatedly charged people at the square in order to disperse them and the rally later turned into a running protest as officers chased youths around the streets of Baku.

The Musavat party had asked for permission to hold the rally, but the authorities refused.

The Musavat Party told Amnesty International that more than 100 people had been detained including leading party activists and at least one journalist. Local activists expect most will be released, but that some could face administrative detention.

“We are calling for radical change. We want genuine democracy. We want dissolution of the parliament and new, democratic elections” Musavat Party leader Isa Ghambar told Amnesty International.

Background

The arrests are the latest in a series of those targeting activists.

On 11 March Baku police rounded up 43 people on their way to protests calling for freedom and an end to government corruption and oppression.

23 people were released after an official warning not to participate in the protest. The rest appeared in court on the evening of 11 March charged with misdemeanours. At least 9 were convicted of disobeying police and sentenced from five days to eight days.

On March 8, police detained **Rashadat Akhundov**, a 27-year-old social media activist who was one of the first to call for the March 11 protest. He was charged with disobeying police orders and sentenced to five days of administrative detention.

Sahavat Sultanli, a member of the Musavat Youth party, was also arrested on 8 March after he posted information on his Facebook page about the March 12 opposition rally. He was charged with violating traffic rules and sentenced to 5 days of administrative detention.

Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, a youth activist and the only co-founder of the 11 March Facebook event living in Azerbaijan, was taken into custody on 4 March, accused of violating a conditional release on charges of evading military service.

At a court hearing later the same day he passed a letter to his lawyer in which he said while in custody he had been tortured and threatened with rape by a senior police official.

Dayanat Babayev, a member of the Youth Committee of the Popular Front Party, which helped organize 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.

Another man, **Etibar Salmanly**, a student who has been distributing leaflets advertizing 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.