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Repression of Azerbaijani activists intensifies ahead of protests

The Azerbaijani authorities must end their clampdown on freedom of expression, Amnesty International said today after 11 more political activists were arrested ahead of Saturday's planned "Day of Wrath" protest.

Activists' recent attempts to hold protests inspired by popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa have been violently suppressed.

"The Azerbaijani government's pre-emptive crackdown on those seeking reform has been wide-reaching and ruthless," said John Dalhuisen, Deputy Director for Amnesty International's Europe and Central Asia Programme.

"As the environment inside Azerbaijan becomes ever more hostile towards all dissenting opinion, new cases of harassment of Azerbaijani journalists and activists have sent chilling messages to those seeking to exercise their right to freedom of expression."

The 11 activists detained today ahead of Saturday's Facebook-organized protest include Ilham Huseynli, Deputy Chairman of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP), APFP member Karim Mehdiyev, Classical Popular Front Party member Yagub Babanli and youth activists Khalid Amanli, Rovshan Nasili and Tabriz Qasimov.

Meanwhile government supporters held a rally outside the home of opposition leader Ali Karimli. The crowd chanted that he was a traitor and a homosexual, while police stood by and watched.

The latest wave of arrests began on 29 March when Nazim Abbasli from the Azerbaijan Democrat Party was given five days' administrative detention. They are expected to continue throughout the night and in the coming days.

It echoes the pre-emptive methods authorities used to suppress protests on 11 and 12 March, when several youth activists who announced the protest on the internet were arrested on questionable charges and convicted in trials that reportedly failed to meet international standards.

A protest on 12 March, organized by opposition parties, was met with violence. The peaceful rally was violently dispersed in the capital Baku, when scores were detained and several beaten.

"The increase in the number of incidents of harassment and violence against activists and journalists in Azerbaijan is deeply concerning. The trend appears to illustrate the determination of the authorities to stamp out any forms of dissent" said Dalhuisen.

Journalists, online activists and human rights organization have been among those targeted in the crackdown.