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Azerbaijani authorities target opposition rally leaders

The Azerbaijani authorities must halt a campaign of intimidation against opposition leaders that has seen activists detained and allegedly beaten by police following anti-government protests, Amnesty International said today.

Key figures from the Musavat Party and Popular Front Party have been detained in a government crackdown following Saturday's "Day of Wrath" protests and charged with serious public order offences despite doubts over the evidence against them.

A ruling party official also warned on Wednesday that the government would crack down severely on another protest planned for 16 April.

"The Azerbaijani regime is sending a clear message that it will go after any dissenting voices in a systematic and brutal fashion," said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for Europe and Central Asia.

"This deliberate targeting of leading opposition figures must stop, and the authorities should allow future public protests to go ahead."

Protestors and lawyers representing some of the men have alleged that police beat them at the time of their arrest and while they were in custody.

Hundreds of riot police gathered in central Baku to stop Saturday's protest, which was inspired by recent protests in the Middle East and North Africa and organized using Facebook.

According to a statement released by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Internal Affairs on 4 April, around 200 people were detained during and immediately after the demonstration, while another 17 activists and organizers were arrested in the days leading up to the protest.

Among those arrested on 2 April were Hasan Karimov, Chairman of the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan (PFP), Tazakhan Miralamli, Chairman of Jalilabad branch of the PFP, and Tural Abbasli, head of the Youth Organisation of the opposition Musavat Party.

Karimov, who has a heart condition, was hospitalized after developing respiratory problems in an overcrowded cell with 54 other inmates.

Miralamli claims that riot police beat him at the time of his arrest and again while he was held at the Sabail district police station. He was later taken to hospital where he was diagnosed with a broken finger and kidney problems as well as severe damage to his left eye.

In a closed trial on 4 April, the Sabail district court remanded Abbasli and two others - Arif Hajili, of the Musavat Party and Mahammad Majidli of the PFP - into custody for two months on a charge of

organizing mass disorder. If convicted, they face a prison sentence of up to three years.

According to a lawyer representing Majidli, the court did not hear any witness testimony or view any evidence to support the charges against his client.

“Azerbaijan’s government should immediately release anyone imprisoned merely for peacefully calling for political change, and it should conduct a full investigation into the ill-treatment and harassment of activists following the recent protests,” said Dalhuisen.

The Azerbaijani authorities have brought charges ranging from organizing mass disorder and wilful disobedience of the police, to illegal arms possession and incitement of ethnic hatred, against individuals detained in relation to the 2 April protests.

The Azerbaijani authorities have also initiated criminal proceedings in absentia against France-based activist Elnur Majidli, who helped to develop the Facebook page calling for the 11 March and 2 April protests.