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Azerbaijan: Journalists brutally attacked as crackdown continues ahead of Eurovision

A violent assault on journalists who tried to film illegal house demolitions on the outskirts of Azerbaijan's capital Baku on Wednesday must be thoroughly and impartially investigated by the authorities, Amnesty International said.

Idrak Abbasov and his brother Adalet Abbasov have been hospitalized after they were attacked by around 25 state employees and police acting under the supervision of officials from Azerbaijan's Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Several other journalists fled the scene when officials targeted them.

"One would have thought that with the Eurovision just around the corner and images from Baku about to be beamed around the world, the authorities would be on their best behaviour," said John Dalhuisen, Director for Europe and Central Asia at Amnesty International.

"Instead, journalists in the process of exposing human rights abuses are themselves coming under attack by state officials bent on preventing them from reporting the truth."

Idrak Abbasov, who last month won Index on Censorship's 2012 Guardian award for journalism, was beaten unconscious, while his brother suffered head injuries and a broken rib.

Hundreds of employees of the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR), accompanied by scores of police, were in the process of illegally demolishing houses in Sulutepe when the Abbasovs arrived with a female journalist, Gunay Musayeva.

According to local human rights defender Zohrab Ismayil, Sulutepe residents were not notified about the plans to evict them and demolish their homes. SOCAR wants to develop an oil field in Sulutepe.

Gunay Musayeva told Amnesty International that when the journalists arrived at the scene a group of SOCAR security staff were attacking Sulutepe residents who had resisted the demolitions.

She reported that, on seeing the journalists filming the attack, a group of SOCAR personnel and police snatched their cameras and struck the Abbasov brothers repeatedly with batons, kicking and hitting them on the floor until they lost consciousness.

"I kept telling them to stop beating him [Idrak], the poor man was on the floor and covered in blood," Musayeva said.

SOCAR employees punched Gunay Musayeva in the face, back and stomach, and pulled her away from the area by her hair:

"They took my camera and my press ID, while they were hitting me they kept insulting us and told us to stop filming the beating of protesters," she added.

Three other journalists, Esmira Javadova, Galib Hasanov and Elnur Mammadov, were attacked by SOCAR employees as they arrived on the scene in a taxi. Police officers looked on as workers brandishing batons smashed the car windows, forcing the journalists to flee.

"The Azerbaijani government is clearly seeking to suppress negative coverage ahead of the Eurovision in May," said Dalhuisen.

"Azerbaijan must respect media freedom – and the song contest's co-organizers, the European Broadcasting Union, must come swiftly to the defence of journalists."