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Azerbaijan: Police violently disperse peaceful rallies ahead of Eurovision

Azerbaijan must immediately halt the police use of violence to suppress freedom of expression, Amnesty International said after two separate peaceful protests were broken up by police in the capital city Baku on Monday. Local activists told Amnesty International that opposition party members were specifically targeted at rallies in Baku's Sabir Garden area and in front of the city authorities' offices. Independent video footage from the scene shows police roughing up demonstrators as they are being dragged away. Around 300 protesters took part in the unsanctioned gatherings which called for the release of political prisoners before Azerbaijan hosts the Eurovision Song Contest later this month. "The glitz and glamour of the Eurovision are only weeks away, but the international media attention the contest will bring seems to be no deterrent for Baku's police, who continue to use brute force to put down peaceful protests," said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International's Europe and Central Asia Programme Director. "We renew our call on the Eurovision's planners to roundly condemn this unacceptable ongoing repression of freedom of expression in Azerbaijan. "Azerbaijan's authorities must take immediate steps to lift bans on public protests in central Baku and to bring to justice all those responsible for the police abuse." Before Monday's protests began, police surrounded the area and attempted to stop activists near the Icheri Sheher metro station. Abulfaz Gurbanly, one of the protest organizers and the head of the opposition Popular Front Party (PFP) Youth Committee, told Amnesty International that the protesters had gathered to "demand freedom of assembly and the release of all political prisoners". In recent months, Baku city authorities have permitted some protests, but have maintained a ban on opposition parties holding rallies in the city centre, instead relegating such gatherings to the far outskirts of the city. Gurbanly and 17 other activists were detained at Monday's protests before being held at two different Sabail District Police departments. Ten of them were driven west of the city to the Gobustan Reserve and released with a verbal warning, and the remaining eight detainees were given written warnings before being set free. Police also briefly detained another group of 10 female activists at the rallies, and drove them away from the scene before releasing them in the city's Akhundov Garden area. Gurbanly told Amnesty International that police had used beatings and violence while dispersing the peaceful protesters. He described how policemen punched him and dragged him by his hair during his arrest. Independent videos from the protests posted to YouTube show uniformed police officers shoving, punching and kicking peaceful protesters, as well as dragging some away as they shout "freedom" (Azadliq). "This latest crackdown on peaceful protests is sadly an accurate indicator of the Azerbaijani authorities' attitude towards freedom of expression. It must be remedied by ensuring those responsible are swiftly brought to justice," said Dalhuisen.