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Azerbaijan: Investigate allegations of harassment, intimidation and threats against journalist

Azerbaijani authorities must promptly, thoroughly, impartially and effectively investigate allegations that pro-government journalists have threatened to release intimate photos of Azerbaijani journalist Sevinj Osmanqizi. These alleged actions are a clear violation of the rights to freedom of expression and private life, and the perpetrators should be brought to justice and the harassment and intimidation ended immediately.

Pro-government media in Azerbaijan aired private conversations of U.S.- based Azerbaijani journalist Sevinj Osmanqizi on 7 April. On 21 April, pro-government journalists threatened Sevinj Osmanqizi publicly, calling on her to stop criticising Azerbaijan and deactivate her YouTube channel. They warned that should she not comply, intimate pictures and videos of her would be posted online in addition to the already-posted private conversations.

Sevinj Osmanqizi has declared that she will not close her YouTube channel despite the harassment, intimidation and threats. Sevinj Osmanqizi is not aware of how the pro-government media in Azerbaijan obtained her private conversations, photos and videos. She believes she has been a victim of illegal surveillance.

Sevinj Osmanqizi fled Azerbaijan to the U.S. in 2012 following government-orchestrated harassment, intimidation and threats. She launched her YouTube channel two years ago, focusing on lack of good governance and corruption in Azerbaijan. Sevinj Osmanqizi has interviewed opposition political figures and critical activists. Shortly before receiving the threats, the journalist ran a series of programs centred on corruption in the oil and gas sector of Azerbaijan.

In 2012 another Azerbaijani journalist and former a prisoner of conscience Khadija Ismayilova faced similar threats. A Radio Free Europe reporter, Khadija Ismayilova had been investigating claims of links between President Ilham Aliyev's family and a lucrative construction project in Azerbaijan's capital Baku when she received a letter on 7 March 2012 containing intimate pictures of her. Unknown individuals had apparently secretly entered her apartment and placed hidden cameras in her room. The letter threatened to "shame" her if she did not abandon her journalistic work, but she refused to be silenced and exposed the attempted blackmail. Intimate video recordings featuring Khadija Ismayilova were posted online soon afterwards.

Azerbaijan must promptly, thoroughly and effectively investigate the threats to release

private materials concerning Sevinj Osmanqizi and ensure that no Azerbaijani journalist and no person in Azerbaijan is harassed, intimidated and threatened simply for exercising their right to freedom of expression.