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## **Azerbaijan: Eurovision is deaf to human rights abuses**

The refusal of the organization behind Eurovision to condemn human rights abuses in Azerbaijan provides a carte blanche to the government's crackdown, Amnesty International said after another two peaceful protests were violently dispersed.

Azerbaijan is hosting the song contest – the flagship event of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) – from 22-26 May.

“Despite publicly committing to support free expression in Azerbaijan, the EBU has maintained a deathly silence on recent repeated violations of that right,” said Max Tucker, Amnesty International's Azerbaijan campaigner, who is currently in the country's capital Baku.

“The lack of action by the EBU and the international community is giving the authorities carte blanche to continue violently crushing dissent without consequence.”

On Monday, more than 200 demonstrators gathered in two locations in central Baku, the Azerbaijani capital, calling for an end to corruption and respect for human rights.

According to protest organizers, police forced participants onto buses and drove them out of town, beating several and detaining 38.

One of the organizers, Abulfaz Gurbanly, told Amnesty International that he was punched, kicked and hit with a truncheon while being held at a police station. He said that several other protesters were also beaten in custody.

The peaceful protests were dispersed in full view of a number of international journalists, casting doubt on the EBU's assertions that bringing international media attention to Baku would improve the human rights situation.

“The increased media coverage will be meaningless if it does not persuade Azerbaijan's diplomatic and business partners to act in defence of freedom of expression,” Tucker said.

“Azerbaijan's authorities seem to think they can ride out negative coverage unscathed, leading to a renewed crackdown on dissent.”

Amnesty International has noticed a fresh wave of human rights violations in Azerbaijan. A recent briefing documented numerous cases where journalists and human rights defenders have been attacked, blackmailed and imprisoned. The EBU has not publicly commented on any of these cases.

The organization is also concerned that local activists who have sought to use Eurovision to highlight rights abuses will be targeted after the event.

State-owned newspapers have already started a smear campaign against leaders of the Sing for Democracy campaign, labelling them as agents of neighbouring Armenia, with whom Azerbaijan has had a territorial dispute for the last 20 years.

“We hope the international journalists we have spoken to in recent weeks will not forget us after Eurovision,” said Rasul Jafarov, one of the Sing for Democracy campaign organizers. “That could be very dangerous for us.”