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Azerbaijan opposition leader ambushed amid pre-election clampdown

A thorough, independent investigation is needed into what appears to have been an orchestrated attack on Azerbaijani opposition presidential candidate Isa Gambar on the campaign trail, Amnesty International said.

According to Gambar's Musavat Party, he was on his way to campaign in the southern coastal city of Lenkoran on Sunday when 10 vehicles attempted to block his convoy at the city's entrance.

A Musavat spokesperson told Amnesty International that a crowd of more than 100 people then pelted the candidate's convoy with rocks and eggs taken from nearby trucks, smashing the car windows. Nine people in Gambar's entourage were injured including several who were punched and kicked and Musavat Party deputy leader Gulagha Aslanli, who had his foot run over by a car.

During the ambush, a Musavat Party photographer, Mehman Karimov, was briefly detained for questioning by men in plainclothes who appeared to be directing the crowd. He was released after they returned his camera.

Police officers who were nearby did not intervene, but Gambar and his convoy managed to flee the scene – only after being rammed by a truck and followed for several kilometres by a group of around five cars.

“The apparently organized nature of the ambush on Isa Gambar's convoy and the failure of the police to intervene is clearly very worrying and needs to be investigated,” said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International's Director for Europe and Central Asia.

“The authorities must launch an immediate investigation into the incident. Meanwhile Azerbaijan's European partners should be demanding an explanation for how a serious assault on the opposition Presidential candidate was allowed to take place.”

The ambush came just 10 days after Gambar announced his intention to run for President in the October 2013 elections, and the day after scores were arrested at a major opposition protest in the capital Baku.

Around 2,000 people had gathered in Baku on Saturday to protest against the death of a young army conscript who is believed to have been tortured to death.

Although the protest was not organized by a political party, according to human rights and opposition activists, at least 50 opposition activists were targeted and arrested by police. At least 22 were charged and handed large fines on Monday between 300 and 600 AZN (US\$380-760). According to the State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan, US\$513 is the average monthly wage in Baku.

“Despite recently releasing a number of prisoners of conscience, the Azerbaijani government continues to

arrest opposition activists for peacefully expressing dissent,” said Dalhuisen.

“Coupled with the attack on the opposition candidate, this does not bode well for a fair and free presidential election in which the fundamental rights to freedom of assembly and expression are respected.”