

AI Index: PRE 01/256/2012
16 May 2012

Azerbaijan: Opposition activist freed as pre-Eurovision hunger strike begins

Seventeen Azerbaijani prisoners of conscience must be released immediately, Amnesty International said as 11 people jailed for their role in anti-government protests last year launched a hunger strike on Tuesday.

An unexpected court decision the same day ordered the release of their fellow activist and a prisoner of conscience Elnur Majidli, who had been serving a two-year prison sentence following his arrest during an unsanctioned demonstration in the capital Baku on 2 April 2011.

The prisoners jailed in relation to last year's anti-government's protests have vowed to continue their hunger strike until the end of the Eurovision song contest, which takes place in Baku later this month.

"Elnur Majidli's release is very welcome news, but the Azerbaijani authorities must now immediately and unconditionally free all the remaining 17 prisoners of conscience who remain behind bars," said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International's Europe and Central Asia Programme Director.

"When viewers across the world tune in for the Eurovision this month, the most convincing way for Azerbaijan to present itself as a modern, progressive nation will be for the authorities to end their ongoing crackdown on freedom of expression."

According to Majidli, Baku's Khazar District Court responded to his request to be released by holding a hearing at his prison on Tuesday. His lawyer was not present at the session, which resulted in the activist being freed.

Speaking to an opposition newspaper, Majidli said the decision was unexpected and his release was unconditional – although he will serve the remainder of his two-year term out of prison.

The 11 hunger strikers still behind bars since last year's demonstrations are Arif Hajili, Shahin Hasanli, Sahib Karimov, Mahammad Majidli, Babek Hasanov, Tural Abbasli, Rufat Hajibaili, Ulvi Guliyev, Vidadi Isgandarov, Zulfuqar Eyvazov and Ahad Mammadli.

Some of the prisoners' relatives have joined the hunger strike in solidarity with them. In addition to the hunger strikers, six other prisoners of conscience – including Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, who also participated in last year's protests – still languish in Azerbaijani jails.

Members of Azerbaijan's opposition plan to hold another unsanctioned demonstration in downtown Baku on 19 and 20 May, before the Eurovision finals. Baku's mayor's office has yet to respond to their request for a venue.

On Monday, police in Baku violently dispersed two separate peaceful protests in the city centre, detaining

18 opposition activists and organizers.

As with previous recent demonstrations, the protesters were calling for the release of prisoners of conscience and an end to restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of association in Baku.

“Baku city authorities must stop preventing peaceful protests, and should grant permission for next weekend’s planned demonstrations,” said Dalhuisen.

“Their attempts to tighten the noose around dissent are bound to unravel amid increased international scrutiny during Eurovision.”

In recent months, Amnesty International has documented how Azerbaijani authorities have repeatedly targeted individuals for their journalistic work or peaceful activism.

In March, well-known investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova received a letter threatening the publication of intimate pictures of her if she did not abandon her work. When she refused and exposed the blackmail attempt, a video of her having sex was posted on a fake mirror website of Azerbaijan’s main opposition party.

Last month, state employees and police severely beat up journalist Idrak Abbasov while he was reporting on a forced eviction on the outskirts of Baku.

And earlier this month, student activist Jabbar Savalan was conscripted into the army despite being exempt from military service, prompting concerns he was targeted for his peaceful activism.